



KEYNOTES

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF
THE EVANSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

LAWRENCE ECKERLING, MUSIC DIRECTOR

Rhapsodies in Red, White, and Blue

ON APRIL 19, PIANIST JEFFREY BIEGEL RETURNS

to the ESO to perform the Illinois premiere of *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue*, a new piano concerto by Peter Boyer. Conceived by Biegel and Boyer as a response to the divisions of contemporary life, the work invites listeners to “join hands through music, despite all the divisions and differences.” Commissioned by the Rhapsody National Initiative—a nationwide consortium of orchestras that includes the ESO—the concerto reflects a shared commitment to unity through artistic collaboration. The program also features beloved works by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, George Gershwin, and Leonard Bernstein.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912) rose to international prominence through his three cantatas based on Longfellow’s *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast*. Widely celebrated in the United States, he was especially admired by African American intellectuals such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, who recognized him as a pioneering figure of Black influence in classical music. His *Petite Suite de Concert* (1911) is a compact four-movement work drawn from themes of the unfinished *The Clown and Columbine*, inspired by a poem by Hans Christian Andersen. With its light textures, elegant orchestration, and strong French influence, the suite exemplifies Coleridge-Taylor’s refined lyrical voice and gained wider recognition after his untimely death at age 37.

Born Jacob Gershowitz, George Gershwin (1898–1937) was shaped by the diverse musical life of New York City, absorbing influences ranging from ragtime and jazz to Tin Pan Alley and European traditions. In 1936, shortly after completing *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin turned to what would become his final commissioned musical, *Shall We Dance*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The score includes Promenade “Walking the Dog,” a brief piece for chamber orchestra written for a lighthearted cruise ship scene. Its relaxed accompaniment and jazz inflected clarinet melody capture the effortless charm and rhythmic vitality that define Gershwin’s style.

Gershwin’s landmark *Rhapsody in Blue* was commissioned in 1924 by bandleader Paul Whiteman for his “Experiment

SUNDAY, APRIL 19

— 2:30 PM

**RHAPSODIES IN RED,
WHITE, AND BLUE**



in Modern Music” concert. Though unfinished at its premiere—Gershwin famously improvised much of the piano solo—the work was an immediate success and propelled the composer to international fame. Nearly a century later, Peter Boyer’s (b. 1970) *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue* pays tribute to that legacy through a nationwide commissioning project. Fully funded through the American Composers Forum, the initiative enabled orchestras across all 50 states to participate without co-commissioning fees, with Jeffrey Biegel serving as soloist throughout.

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990), one of the most influential American artists of the 20th century, is represented by his *On the Waterfront* Suite. Drawn from his acclaimed film score, the suite distills the drama of corruption, violence, and fragile romance into a single, continuous movement, blending jazz inflected themes, powerful brass writing, and a haunting love theme that captures the score’s gritty emotional depth. 🎧



MUSICAL INSIGHTS

FRIDAY, APRIL 17, 2026

1:00 PM

(NOTE DIFFERENT TIME!)

FREE

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THE PUBLIC

MEET JEFFREY BIEGEL

1611 CHICAGO AVE., EVANSTON
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This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council through federal funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Behind The Scenes

Dear ESO Subscribers,

One of the long-standing ways to keep orchestra music alive and relevant is by commissioning new works from composers. In 1998, the traditional commissioning model was upended and was revolutionized with a consortium model by our upcoming piano soloist Jeffrey Biegel, made aware nationally by the American Symphony Orchestra League in “Ford’s Made in America” initiative in 2006, and today, 28 years later, has become one of the major ways new works come to life.

Under the traditional commissioning model, an orchestra hired a composer and paid for this commission, usually in honor of some milestone within their organization. They got the rights to the world premiere and often received rights to the first commercial recording of the work. For a composer of stature, the cost for such a commission in today’s dollars is typically \$1,500–\$5,000 per minute of music. A 15-minute composition was quite costly, and under this model, all of the importance was on the world premiere; a great challenge was getting a second performance (or more) of the newly commissioned work.

In 1998, pianist Jeffrey Biegel commissioned Ellen Taaffe Zwillich’s *Millenium Fantasy*, with 27 orchestras paying into the funding. This was a model that later became known as “the consortium model.” It was different and beneficial in three ways. First, an orchestra got to participate in the commissioning of a new work for only a fraction of the cost

required under the traditional model because that cost was shared by many orchestras. Second, the participating orchestras all got to be part of the prestige of bringing new music into the world. And third, with multiple performances, the composer had many more orchestras and audiences hear the music. This is the true definition of win-win.

In 2005, “Ford’s Made In America” publicized this consortium model and funded it. It was then that the Evanston Symphony first participated in a consortium with Joan Tower’s *Made in America*, performed in 2006. The subsequent consortium works we funded and performed were Joseph Schwantner’s *Chasing Light* (2009), Christopher Theofanidis’ *Dreamtime Ancestors* (2016), and Zhou Tian’s *Transcend* (2020).

To come full circle, we will perform Peter Boyer’s *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue* on our upcoming concert, with Jeffrey Biegel as both commissioner and soloist. This is the first 50-state initiative where no orchestras needed to pay to participate. I know the orchestra is waiting with anticipation for this performance, and you, our audience, will be blown away! See you then! 🎶

—Lawrence Eckerling
Music Director, Evanston Symphony Orchestra



Musical Insights

A free pre-concert event at The Merion
Friday, April 17, 1:00 PM



Each Friday prior to all of our regular concerts, we offer a free hour of music, performance, and insights. If you enjoy our concerts, then you will love this opportunity! Maestro Eckerling talks about the music we will be performing and demonstrates some of the themes to listen for. His insights really bring the music to life and greatly enhance your concert experience.

In addition, our featured soloist (on April 17th, this will be Jeffrey Biegel himself) talks about the featured concerto and plays some excerpts. It’s an amazing opportunity to hear this nationally recognized pianist talk about two of his favorite composers — George Gershwin and Peter Boyer. Biegel commissioned Boyer to write *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue* to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Join us on Friday April 17th, 1:00 pm, at The Merion in downtown Evanston. Not only will you love this hour of music, it will increase your enjoyment of our concert on Sunday as you recognize the themes in the music being played.

The Merion is a delightful setting and provides complimentary refreshments. What more could you ask? See you on April 17th! 🎶

Change of Concertmaster

Julie Fischer, our concertmaster, injured her hand a couple of months back. Joe Chervin, one of our fabulous first violinists, took her place for our February concert and will do so again for our April concert. Thank you, Joe! We hope to welcome Julie back for our June concert. 🎶

The (Continuing) Unorthodox Musical Path of Jeffrey Biegel



Jeffrey Biegel's musical path has indeed been unorthodox, from 85% deafness as a child to his work with pop music artists, to his career as a soloist. Here we bring you the inspiration and creation of *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue*.

In 1998, Jeffrey took a huge step outside music orthodoxy. Smaller orchestras can rarely afford to fund commissions, but Jeffrey realized that a group of smaller orchestras could each contribute a portion of the necessary funds and all could then showcase the new work, thus eliminating the "second performance" problem Maestro Eckerling mentions in this *Keynotes*. Jeffrey's first commission under what has become known as the "consortium model" was Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's *Millenium Fantasy* (2000), with 27 orchestras paying into the pot and subsequently performing the piece. Jeffrey had broken open the gates that had constrained commissioning and invited in a wider swath of orchestras.

Jeffrey last performed with the ESO in January 2020, our last live concert before the pandemic lockdown, when the music world had to find creative ways to connect with its audiences. Jeffrey wanted to do "something for orchestras and the world after Covid," and his main "pandemic project" did just that. "I wanted to make a bold statement about strength in America," he said, "and strength in American orchestras, a statement to help people come together in unity and identify who they are." To accomplish this goal, Jeffrey formed the "Rhapsody National Initiative," a consortium of 50 orchestras from the 50 States to celebrate the centennial of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, which burst onto the world's stage in 1924.

Jeffrey first approached Peter Boyer, a composer whose works such as *Ellis Island: The Dream of America* and *The Dream Lives On: A Portrait of the Kennedy Brothers*, embody

his belief in the import of music to reflect the history of America. Boyer at first refused. Jeffrey persisted, however, and Boyer finally agreed to compose *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue*. His composition pays some homage to Gershwin influences and gives what Jeffrey calls "hat tips," such as an occasional Charleston rhythm, but the music is Boyer, not Gershwin.

Jeffrey's enthusiasm about *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue* is evident. "Music has a way of reaching people inside that words could never do," he said. "I wanted a piece about the symbol of the American flag, to reflect America as a place where people have thrived, and to keep it going. Freedom is fragile. You have to work at it to keep it alive. This music rises above audience to show something greater than us and how we need to work hard to keep it safe. It's a laser beam to the American soul, a musical missile that soars on its own energy. It's the flag, higher than everything."

Since the premiere of *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue* in 2023, Jeffrey's "pandemic project" has far surpassed his initial expectations. Sixty-eight orchestras are now participating in the consortium, and in a pleasant plot twist, no orchestra has had to contribute any money to the project. Jeffrey managed to raise all of the funds from other sources.

In celebration of the 2024 centenary, and not without a ha'penny's worth of irony, Jeffrey performed *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue* (without an Oxford comma) in a recording with the London Symphony Orchestra. We of course had to ask why such an unabashedly American celebratory work wasn't recorded with an American orchestra. Jeffrey replied that Peter Boyer already had relationships with the LSO and that the recording would be less expensive in London. Then he added with a delightful laugh, "I raised the money — and Peter spent it!"

Thank you, Jeffrey — and welcome back!! 🎵

—Kelly Brest van Kempen

LaRob K. Rafael: Presenting Classical Music in Color



Our concert host, LaRob K. Rafael, is a prominent national voice for the advancement of classical music by minority composers.

LaRob grew up in Temple Hills, MD, a small town near Washington, DC. "Everybody in my family could sing," he said, "and if we had a dog, the dog could sing too!" LaRob was raised in the church, where music was always the foundation. "For me, it was the choir singing, the sermonic selections. From a very young age, I noticed how music could affect people, could make people feel things, could make people feel joy and comfort in the midst of everything that was going on. That's always stuck with me."

His promising voice took him to Suitland (MD) High School for the Performing Arts, where he was immersed in classical music. "This was such an experience for me because it was a predominantly Black high school with hundreds of Black and Brown teachers, and everything was just so fresh and new and exciting!"

When it came to college, LaRob wanted to go to the Hartt School at the University of Hartford, where many of his

friends were headed. But DePaul kept calling him, so, at the urging of his mother, he came to Chicago, sight unseen — and stayed here. "It's such a great city with so much music happening, so many things to do, people to see, so I'm stuck here, and I officially call Chicago home!"

LaRob's burnished bass-baritone voice led to a number of opera and other singing engagements, but he was very aware of the focus of classical music on historical European composers, with little room given to Black and Brown composers — or to bringing classical music to Black and Brown audiences. To address this imbalance, LaRob founded Hearing in Color in 2017, which he describes as "a space for artists of color to feel like their music should be celebrated and amplified without caveats, and we're able to do that."

LaRob's work in classical music led to WFMT in 2021, where he hosted the popular *Sounds Classical* with Kristina Lynn until spring 2025. Since last May he has been Director of Composer Advancement with the American Composers Orchestra. "It's based in New York," LaRob says, "but I'm still here in Chicago!" 🎵

—Kelly Brest van Kempen



The view from the back of the stage

Jennifer and Peter Schmeiser moved to Evanston from Florida in 2017 for better jobs, better weather, and, as it turns out, a better orchestra! Pete joined the ESO in early 2018 because, as he says, “if you play bassoon (which nobody else does), the best thing to do when you move to a new town is to join a community orchestra or band. Then you have about 80 people you have a good chance to make friends with!” (Pete says he hasn’t made an enemy yet...) Jen came on board during the pandemic when she was recruited to be Assistant Principal Trombone and is currently in her third season as Acting Principal and now Principal.

Both say that the ESO is “amazing!...It’s a fantastic group and plays really great literature at a high level.” They added that they love the professionalism of the orchestra and find the programming interesting. Given that both the trombones and bassoons sit in the back of the orchestra, we asked them about the view from the orchestral hinterlands.

“Lots of backs of heads!” they both said and, if the program includes a choral work or a piece by Mahler or Stravinsky that has a lot of extra winds, they get pushed back even farther, where “we really don’t get to see Larry in complete, glorious, high definition!”

Jen says that one interesting thing about sitting in the back is that she “can hear everybody. I can hear the strings as a whole. Now, I might not automatically know what Violin 2 is playing against Violin 1, that kind of thing, but I can definitely hear the strings as a whole. And I can hear the woodwinds very well, too.” However, she has to wear an earplug for the trumpets directly to her right because they have a higher pitch, which hurts her ear!

As for the bassoons, Pete says “we’re always pretty much dead center and in the back of any group so I just get to project all my sound on everybody else! We’re quite surrounded and you have a row of noise hitting you from the back but, like Jen said, it’s very comprehensive and you get a really good impression of the entire sound field. You don’t get an overbalance of one thing or another — unless the trombones are really going for it, then all you hear is just trombone in your ear. So now I wear earplugs, too...”

The view: the backs of lots of heads; a good impression of the entire sound field; earplugs are a necessity; and sometimes Larry isn’t in complete, glorious, high definition! 🎧



A word from our April concert sponsors, Todd Wiener and Paula Jacobi.

Paula and I reached out to sponsor this concert because this music and bringing pianist Jeffrey Biegel to Evanston are gifts from the ESO to our music loving community.

Coleridge-Taylor was an extraordinary composer and his music is not performed as often as it should be. His *Petite Suite de Concert* is a wonderful choice for this concert.

Rhapsody in Blue is one of the most popular pieces ever written, and for good reason. Jeffrey Biegel performs this as well as anyone ever has. This was acknowledged by Leonard Bernstein, of all people(!) when Bernstein helped launch Jeffrey’s career, raving about his performance of *Rhapsody*. How appropriate that Bernstein’s music is included today, with *On The Waterfront Suite*.

Finally, Peter Boyer’s celebration of the 100th anniversary of *Rhapsody in Blue* — his *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue* — is loved by everyone who has heard it. Thank you to Maestro Lawrence Eckerling and the ESO for premiering it in Illinois! 🎧

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the power of music
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Celebrate the Evanston Symphony Orchestra with a gift to our 2026 Annual Fund

As we head into the final stretch of our 2025–2026 season, one feeling rises above all the rest: gratitude. Every note we play, every smile in the audience, every young listener whose interest we pique, is made possible by people like you who believe in the power of live music. This year, the ESO helped our community gather in a way that feels increasingly rare. At our various concerts, neighbors sat side by side, students shared their first orchestral experience, and families discovered new favorites together. Music has a beautiful way of reminding us that we belong to something larger than ourselves — and your generosity keeps that experience alive.

Your gift ensures that live orchestral music remains accessible, welcoming, and woven into the cultural fabric of our community. 



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