

# Burchfield & Whitman in Opera and Song

Buffalo Opera Unlimited Performs the Music of  
Nell Shaw Cohen



Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *The Coming of Spring*, 1917-1943; Watercolor on paper, mounted on  
presswood, 34 x 48 inches; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund, 1943



**Burchfield  
Penney  
Art Center**

**Peter and Elizabeth C.  
Tower Auditorium**

August 4, 2024 2:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

# **Program**

*The Open Road* (2023/Arr. 2024)  
Text by Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

*Laws for Creations* (2008/Arr. 2024)  
Text by Whitman

*Proofs of Coming Fullness* (2024) - World Premiere  
Text by Whitman

*The Coming of Spring* (2013/Arr. 2024)  
Libretto by Nell Shaw Cohen  
Based on the Writings of Charles E. Burchfield

All works composed by Nell Shaw Cohen (b. 1988).

## **Artists**

Joe Dan Harper, tenor  
Alex Kosmowski, tenor  
Matthew Marco, piano

Stage Direction by Nell Shaw Cohen and Alex Kosmowski  
Properties supplied by Karen Podd

Composer and librettist **Nell Shaw Cohen** (b. 1988) evokes landscapes, visual art, and the lives of mavericks in her lyrical works for concert and stage. *Sauntering Songs*, a 75-minute live album of Cohen's choral and vocal works commissioned and recorded by three-time GRAMMY-nominee Skylark Vocal Ensemble, featuring performances by Juventas New Music Ensemble, was released in 2023. Her past commissions also include collaborations with Houston Grand Opera, Boston Choral Ensemble, soprano Laura Strickling, and Montage Music Society, et al. Cohen's projects have garnered an OPERA America Commissioning Grant for Women Composers and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich Prize from the International Alliance for Women in Music, among other honors, and her operas have been given workshop performances by many organizations, including Fort Worth Opera, American Opera Projects, and New Dramatists. Cohen earned her degrees in composition from New York University and New England Conservatory. As Founder & Director of Landscape Music (LandscapeMusic.org), she advocates for music inspired by landscape, nature, and place. She lives in the Shawangunk Mountains of New York's Hudson Valley. Learn more at [nellshawcohen.com](http://nellshawcohen.com).

Hailed for his “magnificent purity of expression” (Fanfare Magazine) and “stirring delivery” (Boston Globe), tenor **Joe Dan Harper** is a versatile and engaging interpreter of a wide-ranging repertoire from Schubert and Britten to a variety of contemporary composers. In addition to the premier of Kurt Rohde’s *Death With Interruptions* in 2015, he has premiered works by numerous composers, including Thea Musgrave, Stephen Paulus, Daniel Pinkham, Libby Larsen, Ned Rorem, Robert Deemer and Lior Navok.

A passionate interpreter of song repertoire with a noted gift for expressive and poetic diction, he has appeared with The Boston Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Boston Academy of Music, South Carolina Opera, Utah Festival Opera and Utah Opera, and has been heard in such venues as Boston’s Jordan Hall, Berlin’s Gorki Theater, and the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. He was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to Germany, has been a Fellow at the Steans Institute for Young Artists at the Ravinia Festival and the Tanglewood Music Center. He holds degrees in performance from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston and Southern Methodist University. Recently awarded the SUNY Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Work, Mr. Harper has been a member of the SUNY Fredonia voice faculty since 2004.

**Alexander Kosmowski** is grateful to be involved with this production of *The Coming of Spring* by Nell Shaw Cohen. He has performed in *Amerike - The Golden Land* at the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene and *La Bohème* at Buffalo Opera Unlimited. He is also a staff tenor at Westminster Presbyterian Church and teaches voice in his free time. Alexander thanks his voice teacher, Joe Dan Harper, his wife, Terry, and his family and friends for their support.

**Matthew Marco** is a conductor, coach, and collaborative pianist based in Buffalo, NY. This past season was his first as Artistic Director of Buffalo Opera Unlimited, a company that highlights Buffalo-based talent in operatic works from both within and outside of the traditional canon. He also returns to the University at Buffalo as Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance, teaching courses in musicianship, coaching, and music directing all curricular musicals. In addition to opera and musical theater, he enjoys regular performances with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, including the 2022 Carnegie Hall performance, Grammy winning Naxos recording sessions, and concerts on both the classics and pops series.

Mr. Marco has also performed with Amarillo Opera (TX), the Center for Contemporary Opera (NY), Civic Morning Musicals (Syracuse, NY), GALA Choruses (Minneapolis, MN), the National Choral Festival (Carnegie Hall, NY), Opera Tampa (FL), and the Savannah VOICE Festival (GA). Locally, he has held conducting and coaching positions with Nickel City Opera, the Orchard Park Symphony Orchestra, the Western New York Chamber Orchestra, the Hillman Opera Company, and Opera-Lytes. For eleven years, he was the accompanist of the Buffalo Master Chorale, and has performed with the Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus, the Buffalo Chamber Players, Friends of Vienna, and the Western New York Chamber Orchestra. Mr. Marco studied piano with Anne Kissel and François Germain, and conducting with Paul Ferington and Brian Doyle.

## Composer's Program Notes

*The Open Road* is an excerpt from *Sauntering Songs*: a concert-length cantata on the theme of walking, commissioned by Skylark Vocal Ensemble. This selection, which forms the opening number of the work, sets excerpts from Walt Whitman's invigorating "Poem of The Road." Originally scored for choir with a quartet of flute, piano, electric guitar, and cello, the song will be performed today for the first time in a reduced arrangement for solo tenor and piano.

Presented here in a new version for tenor, *Laws for Creations* is one of my earliest compositions for classical voice: an art song originally written in 2008 for baritone. I was compelled by Walt Whitman's treatment of the themes of creativity and self-determination, and sought to respond to the spirit of his poetry in my musical setting.

*Proofs of Coming Fullness* is a World Premiere written exclusively for today's performance. In his 1882 autobiography *Specimen Days*, Walt Whitman penned a series of vividly observed miniature prose pieces documenting his impressions of the natural world. Excerpted from an entry dated April 6, the text of this song describes an early spring morning in which Whitman observes signs of seasonal change. This song was composed as a complementary piece to the following work, *The Coming of Spring*, which also highlights the phenomena of early spring.

*The Coming of Spring* is a one-act monodrama based on the writings of visionary American painter Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967). A series of poignant chronological episodes reveal how perceptions of nature framed Burchfield's life experience: from days collecting insects during his rural Midwestern childhood, to the years in which he supported his large family by producing popular images of industrial and suburban scenery in Buffalo.

Burchfield's mission to develop the expressive power of his art—and, in particular, to convey the transition from winter to spring in a single image—leads to a revelation in 1943 with the completion of the monumental titular painting, which he first began in 1917.

The text of my libretto is adapted from transcriptions of Burchfield's journals, essays, and letters, and even a few quotations from a 1936 LIFE Magazine profile of the painter. Original text forms connective tissue between these sources, helping to dramatize events in Burchfield's life.

Originally scored for tenor with a six-piece chamber ensemble, *The Coming of Spring* is presented here for the first time with piano accompaniment.

-Nell Shaw Cohen



# Texts

## The Open Road

*Excerpt from "Poem of The Road" by Walt Whitman, from "Leaves of Grass" (1856 edition).*

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open  
road!

Healthy, free, the world before me!

The long brown path before me, leading wherever  
I choose!

The earth expanding right hand and left hand,  
The picture alive, every part in its best light,  
The music falling in where it is wanted, and  
stopping where it is not wanted,  
The cheerful voice of the public road—the gay  
fresh sentiment of the road.

From this hour, I ordain myself loosed of limits  
and imaginary lines!

Going where I list—my own master, total and  
absolute,

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open  
road!

Healthy, free, the world before me!

The long brown path before me, leading wherever  
I choose!

The cheerful voice of the public road—the gay  
fresh sentiment of the road.

The open road!

## Laws for Creations

*“Laws for Creations” by Walt Whitman from “Leaves of Grass” (1871 edition).*

Laws for Creations,  
For strong artists and leaders—for fresh broods of  
    teachers, and perfect literats for America,  
For noble savans, and coming musicians.

All must have reference to the ensemble of the world,  
    and the compact truth of the world;  
There shall be no subject too pronounced—All works  
    shall illustrate the divine law of indirections.

What do you suppose Creation is?  
What do you suppose will satisfy the Soul, except to  
    walk free, and own no superior?  
What do you suppose I would intimate to you in a hun-  
    dred ways, but that man or woman is as good as  
    God?  
And that there is no God any more divine than Your-  
    self?  
And that that is what the oldest and newest myths  
    finally mean?  
And that you or any one must approach Creations  
    through such laws?

## **Proofs of Coming Fullness**

*Excerpt from "Specimen Days" (1882) by Walt Whitman.*

"I am sitting in bright sunshine, at the edge of the creek, the surface just rippled by the wind. All is solitude, morning freshness, negligence. [...] Then a poor little dead leaf, long frost-bound, whirls from somewhere up aloft in one wild escaped freedom-spree in space and sunlight, and then dashes down to the waters, which hold it closely and soon drown it out of sight. The bushes and trees are yet bare, but the beeches have their wrinkled yellow leaves of last season's foliage largely left, frequent cedars and pines yet green, and the grass not without proofs of coming fullness. And over all a wonderfully fine dome of clear blue, the play of light coming and going, and great fleeces of white clouds swimming so silently."

## **The Coming of Spring**

*Libretto by Nell Shaw Cohen, Based on the Writings of Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967)*

### **1. Prologue: Two Hollows**

*Gardenville, New York. April 1943.*

The spring of 1917 was a long dream-like one. I spent every spare moment painting, recreating my childhood memories and moods. My golden year... I was finally home, after art school in Cleveland and New York. I went to a place I'd been many times before: the two hollows in the woods. A deep place worn out of a solid rock. A confusion of sharp rocks and old leaves. Everywhere, The Coming of Spring. The water roared over a steep incline of rock, green with moss, into a deep little pool. The Coming of Spring. On the opposite side hung long white icicles, water frozen as it trickled down out of the crevices in the rock. The Coming of Spring.

## **2. Collecting**

*Salem, Ohio. February 1911.*

Luna Moth. American Silkworm Moth. Hummingbird Hawk-Moth.  
Tiger Swallowtail.

Last summer, under the three large elms growing with their heads leaning together, a large yellow butterfly floated past me and dropped in a clover field nearby. I shall never forget the sight of him unsuspectingly sipping the honey from each tiny flower of the pink clover head, his wings quivering as he walked over the bloom. Suddenly my cap swooped down and I'd caught the beautiful creature between my trembling fingers.

But when I got home, I hesitated. It seemed wrong to destroy his life, but my lust for new specimens overcame my squeamishness. He became part of my collection. Why not admire him as he is instead of pinning him down? What's the use in studying, dissecting, collecting? Only beauty matters. Why not let him belong to Nature?

## **3. New Life**

*Buffalo, New York. May 1923.*

Beginning a new life. Starting a family. Making good at a new job.

I fell in love with Bertha while working on her family's farm. By the spring of '22, I was married and designing wallpaper in Buffalo, New York. Then one bright day this May, Mary was born.

The agonizing wait in the ward by Bertha's side, her pains becoming more definite and regular. Looking out the window... A sparrow burst into song. A faint light came in the east. The pains were sharper, then: only five minutes apart. The sun was up, the sun was up, an oval ball of

red. I said, “Bertha, look outside!”; but she could scarcely enjoy it. Her agony was terrible as they brought her into the delivery room. Outside, the hot white sun beat down on the new downy foliage. When the doctor laid the baby on Bertha's stomach it gave a faint little cry. I thought our baby was like new oak leaves.

I walked home down Linwood Street in the twilight. The trees stood in their new emerald leaves as if they sprouted overnight.

#### **4. Interlude**

*(Instrumental)*

#### **5. Black Iron**

*Buffalo, New York. March 1935.*

A windy, rainy day. Another day in the harbor working on the two drawbridges on the Buffalo Creek. A brisk, vigorous day when the first March fire sweeps over the land. Black Iron.

Are you softening up? Get back to painting fearless indictments of modern life. Pick out spots in Buffalo to hold up to scorn. Crude, harsh and obscene. Oh, Black Iron. Black Iron. Black Iron.

My easel, my feet, sinking in the sand... but I rejoice in all the handicaps. I am searching, I am searching for form and solidity, form and solidity, and a painting quality. Black Iron.

A cold wind from the west. A cold rain beginning to fall. Rain changes to snow. Great flurries of flakes going past the great black counter-weights. I am searching...

## **6. Burchfield's America**

*Gardenville, New York. December 1936.*

Life Magazine, December 28, 1936. "Burchfield's America." "The best landscape painter within several hundred miles of Buffalo, N.Y."

"...lonely but honest pictures of the American scene." "Burchfield at Home." "...dislikes artists' colonies, golf and bridge. Tall, taciturn, unassuming... says the skunk cabbage should be the national flower." "Burchfield's America."

## **7. The Coming of Spring**

*Gardenville, New York. April 1943.*

Two hollows in the woods. Adding the musical sound of water, adding the humming of new life. I must let myself go again in fantasy and realize what I was always aiming for since 1917... Adding the purple first hepatica, adding the candle flame of spring. I must bring it together into one powerful whole and realize what I was always aiming for since 1917!

Now I see my work since then has been a digression: necessary, but not truly in the stream I'm destined to travel. I've been searching for form and solidity and a painting quality that the early pictures lacked. My best and most original work is in the field of nature, the change of weather and seasons; yet the critics and buyers don't see this.

So, since there is little chance of selling pictures until the war is over, I feel free to work on a picture like this and paint entirely for myself. I feel free and unhampered; it is as if I could better let the forces of nature control my brush. The Coming of Spring!

## **8. Epilogue: A Flooded Stream**

Oh, fantasies, fantasies... A long pent-up subconscious yearning for fantasies sweeps onward like a flooded stream.

# Credits

The Burchfield Penney Art Center thanks Sam Magavern for his tireless efforts to present a dynamic exhibition enhanced by special programs. We are grateful for the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation's charitable, ongoing support. Major sponsorship of the exhibition and catalog has been provided by Lora Spiller, Harley Spiller, and Jill Spiller Underwood in loving memory of their parents Harriet and Mortimer Spiller. Additional generous support was given by Dr. Carol R. Angle; Brian D. Baird and Barbara P. Baird; John F. Darby and Candace K. Darby; and anonymous donors.

The Center is sustained in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and Erie County. Additional support is provided by Buffalo State University, the Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Trust, the Mary A. H. Rumsey Foundation, the James Carey Evans Endowment, and Burchfield Penney members and friends.

Images used in the video projection for this program are as follows, in order of appearance. Except where otherwise noted, all paintings are by Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967).

1. *Dusty Road in July*, 1952-58; watercolor and charcoal on paper laid down on board, 35 x 50 inches; Image from the Burchfield Penney Art Center Archives
2. Samuel Hollyer, *Walt Whitman, three-quarter length portrait, facing front, as a young man, dressed in rural attire for frontispiece of Leaves of Grass.*, 1854. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004678989/>



3. *Blue Vista*, 1916; watercolor on paper, 20 x 14 inches; Private Collection
4. *Untitled Journal 45 (Journal Page 50)*, April 12-13, 1943; graphite pencil on unlined paper; 9 5/8 x 11 5/8 inches; Burchfield Penney Art Center courtesy of the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation, 2000
5. Charles E. Burchfield's Gardenville Studio (photograph), on view at the Burchfield Penney Art Center
6. *Black Hollow (Black Void)*, April 28, 1917; watercolor on paper, 22 x 18 inches; Image from the Burchfield Penney Art Center Archives
7. *Wind-Blown Asters*, 1951; watercolor on paper, 30 x 40 inches; Burchfield Penney Art Center, Gift of Dr. Edna M. Lindemann, 1968
8. *Robins and Crocuses*, 1923-24, wallpaper mounted on board, pattern #1500, manufactured by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 22 7/8 x 19 5/8 in., Burchfield Penney Art Center, Purchased with funds from the Buffalo Foundation, 1973
9. *March Sunlight*, 1932; watercolor on paper, 18 x 27 inches; Image from the Burchfield Penney Art Center Archives
10. *Black Iron*, 1935, watercolor on paper mounted on board, 28 1/8 x 41 inches, Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Hope Aldrich in memory of her father, John D. Rockefeller 3rd
11. "Burchfield's America," *LIFE Magazine*, December 28, 1936
12. *The Coming of Spring*, 1917-1943; watercolor on paper, mounted on presswood, 34 x 48 inches; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund, 1943

13. *Sun and Rocks*, 1918-50, watercolor and gouache on joined paper mounted on board, 40 x 56 inches, Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Buffalo, New York, Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1953
  
14. *Self-Portrait*, January 1916; watercolor, pencil and conté crayon on paper, 19 13/16 x 16 5/8 inches; Burchfield Penney Art Center, Gift of Charles Rand Penney, 1994

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PRESENTS

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Sung in Italian with English supertitles

**Music by:**

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

**Libretto by:**

**Lorenzo Da Ponte**

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