

**Society for American Music**  
**Annual Conference – Montreal, QC, 2017**  
**Concert in Honour of Vivian Perlis**  
**March 24, 2017 – 7:00 p.m.**

**Program Notes**

**Aaron Copland (1900-1990)**  
**Sonata for Violin and Piano**

Composed in 1942 and premiered two years later, Copland's quick-witted, wartime Violin Sonata bears a heartfelt dedication to Lieutenant Harry H. Dunham, a close friend of Copland killed in action in the Pacific theatre shortly after the composer drew the Sonata's final barline. Dunham, a wealthy young Princeton alumnus, had been a member of Copland's elite artistic circle: composer David Diamond remembered him as "the most adorable, good-looking boy." At the time of the Lieutenant's death, Copland was residing in California, hard at work on the score to *North Star* alongside lyricist Ira Gershwin. Even his glamorous Hollywood work, however, was touched by war: *North Star*, depicting Ukrainian villagers' guerilla resistance to Nazi invasion, was originally conceived as a semi-documentary with input from President Roosevelt and the Russian embassy.

Copland's film work shines through in the prolonged, cinematic phrases of the Sonata's *semplique* introduction, as well as in his detailed attention to patterns of dialogue between the two instruments. A *lento* middle movement, elegiac and transparent, lends the work a sense of sobriety, coloured by Copland's characteristic preference for nebulous perfect fifths. Sparks fly in a rapid-fire finale, intricately contrapuntal yet bright and lightweight. Copland's folksy vocabulary takes centre stage, rhythmic and buoyant, until the work's final phrases plummet back toward a dark, deliberate *lento*, ending *al niente* as though with a cinematic fade-to-black. Virgil Thomson hailed the Violin Sonata as "one of the author's most satisfying pieces," while Canadian musicologist Colin McPhee observed its "simplicity, understatement, and Stein-like syntax" as "both *recherché* and baffling." With its context of war and loss, the Sonata's opening instruction to the violinist—*freely singing*—conjures a wartime impetus toward peace, reflection, and the triumph of freedom.

—Carly Gordon

**Marc Mellits (b. 1966)**  
**Splinter**

"The music, for me, comes from the instruments themselves," Marc Mellits told composer Samuel Adams in an interview for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. "You're going to laugh, but I like imagining myself getting super small—this little tiny Marc—and I climb into the bassoon and just try and imagine what the resonance of the instrument is like."

Mellits teaches as a composition professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and completed studies at the Eastman School of Music, Yale School of Music, and Cornell University. In *Splinter*, the imaginative work of “little tiny Marc” is apparent, as the reed quintet—oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, and bassoon—explores bold, resonant harmonies, homogenizing in rich chords and clusters, or diverging in tightly woven hocket.

Composed in 2014 for the Bay Area–based Splinter Reed Quintet, *Splinter* comprises eight movements each depicting a species of tree, from regal Linden (movement III) to rugged Red Pine (movement VIII). Mellits’ post-Minimalist aesthetic combines rhythmic drive with sophisticated tonal harmonies, while short, simple motives are repeated and interleaved in complex counterpoint. The rare instrumentation of the reed quintet allows for an enormous range of blend and colour. In the fourth movement, “Black Ash,” interlocking cells allow the saxophone and oboe to emerge in alternation; in the seventh movement, “Weeping Willow,” the melody materializes from five staggered entrances, each instrument mapping onto a larger phrase beneath the oboe’s melodic arc. The work’s eight movements might all be conceived of as “splinters”—miniature fragments, never more than two minutes in duration, but each packing a punch.

—Carly Gordon