



**CASE WESTERN RESERVE**  
UNIVERSITY

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**MUSIC GRADUATE RECITAL**  
2025/26 CONCERT SEASON

***Strains so Sweet:***  
***Birds in Song from the***  
***Trouvères to Handel***

**Naomi Grace McMahon**

Soprano

Historical Performance Practice, DMA

**4:00 PM**

**Sunday, April 26, 2026**

**Florence Harkness Memorial Chapel**

11200 Bellflower Road Cleveland, OH

**CWRU**  **1826**  
Celebrating 200 years **2026**

**Department of Music**  
[case.edu/arts/music](http://case.edu/arts/music)

## PERFORMED WITH

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Danur Kvilhaug, historical plucked strings  
Jane Leggiero, viola da gamba, cello  
Sophia Duray, soprano  
Ellen Sauer Tanyeri, baroque flute  
Andrew Hatfield, vielle, violin  
Jonathan Milord, viola  
Mikhail Grazhdanov, harpsichord

## BIOGRAPHY

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Soprano Naomi Grace McMahon (they/them) calls San Antonio, Texas, home. From 2019-2023, they regularly performed with the chorus of Opera San Antonio (Romeo et Juliette, Pagliacci, Tosca) and with the company's educational outreach program. Naomi served as Trobár Medieval Ensemble's inaugural Apprentice Artist for the '25-'26 season, and in 2024 they participated in the Amherst Early Music Festival's Medieval Program. When not singing all kinds of music or researching the intersections of gender, culture, and historically-informed performance, Naomi enjoys the act of creation through sewing and the fiber arts.

Ms. McMahon holds a Master of Music in Voice Performance from Texas Christian University and a Bachelor of Music from Abilene Christian University. They have a deep love for music, from medieval chansons, to baroque sacred music, to opera and musical theatre, and are currently working toward a Doctorate of Musical Arts in Historical Performance Practice here at Case Western Reserve University.

Silence phones & devices

No flash photos or recording

No food/beverages

Restrooms in foyer

**Emergencies:** Follow staff/call **216-368-3333**

**CWRU 200**  **1826**  
**2026**  
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## PROGRAM

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En mai quant li rossignolet Colin Muset (fl. c. 1230-1250)

Useletto selvaggio Jacopo da Bologna (fl. 1340-1386)

*with Sophia Duray and Andrew Hatfield*

Of All the Birds John Bartlet (fl. 1606-1610)

Thou Pretty Bird John Danyel (c. 1564-c. 1626)

This Merry Pleasant Spring Anonymous, 17<sup>th</sup> century

*with Danur Kvilhaug and Jane Leggiero*

Le concert des différents oyseaux Étienne Moulinié (1599-1676)

*with Danur Kvilhaug*

### Pause

O, come sei gentile Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)

*with Sophia Duray and Danur Kvilhaug*

Augellin Stefano Landi (1587-1643)

Canta soave il cigno

*with Danur Kvilhaug and Jane Leggiero*

Pourquoy, doux Rossignol? Jean-Baptiste de Bousset (1662-1725)

Suivez, suivez le doux Printemps Anonymous, Ballard *Recueil*, May 1696

*with Danur Kvilhaug and Jane Leggiero*

### Pause

Sweet Bird, George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

from *L'Allegro, il Pensieroso, ed il Moderato*

*with Ellen Sauer Tanyeri, Andrew Hatfield,  
Jonathan Milord, Jane Leggiero, and Mikhail Grazhdanov*

## PROGRAM NOTES

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Who were the original singers? My money is on the birds. Certainly, human musicians have long found inspiration in birdsong. References to birds are present in lyric poetry of every era throughout the world, and citations of birdsong appear over the entire history of notated music, from early examples such as the 13th-century rota *Sumer is icumen in*, to postmodernist works which incorporate recorded birdsong. There is such a wealth of options that I could have programmed hours upon hours of these bird songs, but I had to draw the line somewhere, so this recital contains a more-or-less chronological journey through a small selection of bird and birdsong depictions from the 13th-18th centuries.

Today's program offers a sample of the wide variety of birds represented in song, though I have undoubtedly missed more than a few. While birds in general brought to mind joy and springtime, each species of bird and its call had specific associations to the authors, composers, and audiences of these songs. Sparrows, for instance, represented sexual desire due to the insistence with which they sing their song during mating season. Swans, though mute, were believed to sing beautifully in the moments just before they died. In the medieval period, owls called to mind disease, darkness, sin, and death, rather than the wisdom they have evoked both before and since.

By far the most commonly depicted bird is the nightingale, due to its connection to courtly love. This bird was believed to forego sleep in order to sing at all hours of the day and night, and therefore was a perfect stand-in for the long-suffering, faithful, noble lover. Nightingales also had another name, Philomel, which carried an association with sorrow. In Greco-Roman mythology, Philomela was raped by Tereus, the king of Thrace, who then cut out her tongue to prevent her telling her sister Procne. The two sisters killed Tereus's son in revenge, and when Tereus then lashed out, the gods turned all three of them into birds. Philomela became a nightingale, forever to wordlessly lament the brutalities she suffered and the loss of her ability to speak.

I have found that bird songs tend to belong to three categories: those about birds, those sung to birds, and those ostensibly sung by birds. A song in any of these categories might imitate birdsong in the voice and/or accompanying instruments using techniques like onomatopoeia, call and response, and extended vocalises.

*This Merry Pleasant Spring* is about birds in the most straightforward sense. It is a late example from a tradition of what might be termed "realistic" bird songs, which began in the 14<sup>th</sup> century; these songs depict birds, either in springtime tableaus or fanciful scenes of conversations between birds, using syllabic onomatopoeia that both imitates birdsong

and sometimes carries textual meaning. More often, though, birds are used as images that evoke a particular feeling, as in *En mai, quant li rossignolet*, where the nightingale simply exists to remind us that spring is the time to go looking for love. Birds can also be metaphors for human states of being, like the swan in *Canta soave il cigno*, whose death-song stands for both the lover's yearning for the beloved and his desire for sexual release. To take things further, in the innuendo-filled *Of all the birds*, Phillip the sparrow is not in fact a sparrow at all, but a stand-in for a human woman. *Useletto selvaggio* is rather unusual among the rest of these songs, because it hearkens back to the idea that vocal music somehow originated in birdsong. The bird in this caccia is a model singer and teacher of singing, with its "soft and sweet melodiousness," a stark contrast to the "forceful belting (*gridar forte*)" Jacopo da Bologna diatribes against throughout the piece.

Songs sung to birds tend to equate the singer's experience of unrequited love to that of a caged songbird. Two songs on this program participate in this theme, setting the same poem from famed Italian pastoral poet Giovanni Battista Guarini. Monteverdi's *O come sei gentile*, from his eighth book of madrigals, presents the original Italian text in a sensual call-and-response duet of flowing melismas, while John Danyel's song *Thou pretty bird* sets an English translation for voice, viol, and lute. Birds can also take on the role of messenger. Most often, the singer beseeches a bird to take a message to their beloved, as in *Augellin*, but birds might also bring messages from the beloved. The protagonist of *Pourquoy doux Rossignol* hopes to receive such a message from the nightingale that wakes him up. In *Suivez, suivez le doux Printemps*, the singer asks the birds to take a message to the world by making his success in love known throughout the forest.

"Sweet Bird," from Handel's *L'Allegro, il Pensieroso, ed il Moderato*, is sung to a bird, but also by a bird. In the preceding *recitativo accompagnato* (performed as a speech in today's concert), the soprano invokes Philomel, asking her for a song. The flute then takes on the role of the nightingale, beginning the subsequent duet with an extended onomatopoeic cadenza. The soprano joins the onomatopoeia, imitating the melodic gestures of the flute in a game of call and response. This piece fits in with a number of other 18th-century songs and arias which align feminine singing with birdsong.

The lute song *Le concert des différents oyseaux* is the only song on the recital sung entirely from the perspective of birds. Published in 1625, this song originated during a period in which Flemish painters, most notably Frans Snyders, produced a large number of realistic animal paintings

called Concerts of Birds. In these artworks, birds of every species, from songbirds to carrion eaters to birds of prey and waterfowl, gather around music books and sing together under the direction of owls. This motif has its origins in the medieval period, as evidenced by the poetry of Chaucer, whose narrative poem *The Parlement of Foules* depicts one such scene. In Moulinié's song, the birds claim that their voices are "more divine than human," and that they are "gods in disguise." Their claims echo a concept from medieval mystical texts, including the writings of Sufis (and even the Qur'an), Kabbalists, and alchemists. To these mystics, the "language of the birds" was a secret that could be bestowed upon humans by divine intervention, revealing esoteric knowledge. All of this lends weight to the idea that, to medieval and early modern audiences, birds were the original authors of song, divine mediators that brought the music of the spheres to the realm of the audible and taught humanity to sing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Creating this recital has been a highlight of my year. I am so grateful to all of my collaborators (and my teachers, Elena and Dean) for being flexible and enthusiastic about putting this together. When I first started programming this concert, I was worried about coordinating so many musicians, but I decided I should go ahead and do it. When else am I going to have such easy access to so many wonderful musicians for a personal project? Thank you endlessly for the gift of your time and talents.

Thank you to everyone in the Musicology and HPP faculty and student cohort who have supported me these past three years. You have taught me much more than I bargained for. I have enjoyed the opportunities I've been given to create and direct my own scholarly journey. I've found new repertoires to obsess over and research rabbit trails to follow, and you have all cheered me on. Not only have I become a better musician and scholar, but you have inspired me to become a better person.

Finally, I would like to give a huge thank you to my parents, who came all the way from Texas for the weekend and brought my sweet husband with them. Having the three of you here today is the best birthday present I could have received this year.

## DEDICATION

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**To my Best Beloved:  
If I were a bird, you'd be my nest.  
Every love song I sing, I sing for you.**

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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**7:30 PM • Tuesday, April 28, 2026**

Parastoo Heidarinejad – Baroque Violin Recital  
Florence Harkness Memorial Chapel

**7:30 PM • Thursday, April 30, 2026**

Bruno Lunkes – Lecture-Recital  
*(Gut) String Theory*  
Florence Harkness Memorial Chapel

**4:00 PM • Saturday, May 2, 2026**

Danur Kvilhaug – Lecture-Recital - *Invention, Ingenuity, and Integrity:  
Italian lute music at the turn of the cinquecento*  
Florence Harkness Memorial Chapel

**7:30 PM • Saturday, May 2, 2026**

Liz Loayza Herrera - Lecture-Recital - *The Empire's Music, The Indian's Voice:  
Indigenous agency and the living baroque archive of the Bolivian missions*  
Florence Harkness Memorial Chapel

**4:00 PM • Sunday, May 3, 2026**

Sophia Duray - Lecture-Recital - *Cecilia Young, Hester Santlow,  
and the Making of English Opera and Dance in Eighteenth-Century London*  
Florence Harkness Memorial Chapel

**7:30 PM • Monday, May 4, 2026**

Mikhail Grazhdanov – Lecture-Recital - *Hélène de Montgeroult  
and the art of Singing on the Piano*  
Florence Harkness Memorial Chapel

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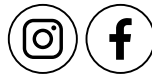
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