TCU COLLEGE of FINE ARTS

School of Music

presents

The Art Songs of Roberto Sierra

Eric Laine, tenor
Cecilia Lo-Chien Kao, piano

November 2, 2026 | 7:00 PM | The Van Cliburn Concert Hall at TCU

Program

Conjuros (1982) — Roberto Sierra (b. 1953)

I. O ya ya Lumba Lumba
II. Lube-Lube
III. Chamalongo
IV. Erisí Balande
V. Ekue
VI. Iyá
VII. Eye Si

Rimas (1996)

I. ¿Qué es poesía?
II. Por una mirada
III. Yo sé
IV. Los suspiros son aire
V. Mi vida es un erial

Intermission

Décimas (2013)

I. Madrugada
II. Amanecer
III. Muerta
IV. Medianoche
V. Agua maldita
VI. Copla lejana
VII. Vida criolla

Julia (2014)

I. Amante
II. “Oh pájaro de amor”
III. Momentos
IV. Interrogaciones
V. Cantar marinero
VI. Canción hacia adentro

Mr. Sierra’s residency is made possible in large part by the TCU College of Fine Arts Guest Artist/Guest Lecturer Grant.

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Program Notes

Sierra's first song cycle, ***CONJUROS*** (*Spells*), was composed while he was studying with György Ligeti in Hamburg. The seven-song work draws on traditional Afro-Cuban ritual chants whose phonetic texts derive from African languages but have become largely untranslatable over time. Rather than arranging existing music, Sierra reimagines fragments of these traditions through a contemporary compositional lens, synthesizing Afro-Caribbean rhythmic and melodic elements with modern harmonic language.

Throughout the cycle, modal writing, additive harmony, open fifths, and rhythmic ostinati evoke an atmosphere of mysticism and ritual. The opening song, "O ya ya Lumba Lumba," establishes an energetic foundation through syncopated *tresillo* patterns and increasingly complex polyrhythms. In contrast, "Lube-Lube" creates a meditative atmosphere with spacious piano sonorities and an unhurried, chant-like vocal line. Elsewhere, the habanera rhythms of "Chamalongo," the improvisatory vocal flourishes of "Erisí Balande," and the Hungarian mode of "Ekue," offer contrasting depictions of ritual activity. Call-and-response gestures between voice and piano further reinforce the relationship between chant and instrumental accompaniment.

Unity emerges through the return of rhythmic and melodic material, particularly the angular minor ninth motive introduced at the outset. Although the preceding songs resist definitive resolution, the concluding "Eye Si" arrives at a G minor tonic, offering a moment of closure while preserving the open-ended quality of ritual itself.

GUSTAVO ADOLFO BÉCQUER (1836–1870) was a Spanish poet whose writing explores the elusive nature of beauty, love, and artistic expression. Influenced by German Romanticism and Andalusian folk poetry, Bécquer sought to express experiences that are ultimately beyond language: the fleeting, mysterious, and luminous qualities of human existence. His *Rimas* (*Rhymes*), a collection of seventy-six poems published posthumously, ranges from joyful declarations of love to reflections on loss, isolation, and the limitations of artistic creation.

Roberto Sierra's ***RIMAS*** sets five poems from Bécquer's collection. Throughout the cycle, voice and piano assume equal importance, establishing a conversational relationship that parallels the poet's search for an elusive ideal. Sierra's shifting tonal centers, spontaneous textural changes, and improvisatory gestures capture the instability of Bécquer's poetic world. In "¿Qué es poesía?," scalar passages move between voice and piano in an intimate musical exchange. "Por una mirada" contrasts lively dance rhythms with a rhapsodic piano cadenza, while the frequent use of octatonic writing in "Yo sé" evokes the mysterious, almost supernatural knowledge of the poet. In "Los suspiros son aire," florid vocal and piano figures suggest the unpredictable movement of the wind, an apt metaphor for emotions that resist containment.

The final song, "Mi vida es un erial," abandons tonal stability altogether. Its disconnected musical lines and descending piano chords portray the poet's isolation and despair. The cycle ends unresolved, illustrating Bécquer's enduring struggle to grasp an ideal that remains perpetually beyond reach.

LUIS LLORÉNS TORRES (1878–1944) was a Puerto Rican poet, lawyer, and advocate for independence. A leading figure in Puerto Rican literary nationalism, he sought to preserve a vision of the island's cultural identity through poetry that celebrates the island's landscape, folklore, and rural life. Lloréns Torres' sixteen *décimas* draw on a poetic

tradition inherited from Spain. Typically organized into ten-line stanzas, the form has become closely associated with Puerto Rican folk music.

In his ***DÉCIMAS***, Sierra arranges seven of Lloréns Torres's poems to trace the passage of a day in Puerto Rico. Compared with his earlier cycles, the work features more accessible tonal language and recognizable musical forms, while foregrounding the Caribbean rhythms associated with Puerto Rican folk traditions. The opening "Madrugada" captures the mystery of dawn through a virtuosic, improvisatory piano part reminiscent of the Puerto Rican *cuatro* (a guitar-like instrument). "Amanecer" transforms the arrival of sunlight into a lively dance, employing syncopation and interlocking rhythms. In contrast, "Muerta" sets a lament for lost love against a slow *tresillo* pattern, lending the music a sense of nostalgic yearning.

The cycle continues through the playful "Medianoche," the ominous barcarolle "Agua Maldita," and the contemplative "Copla lejana." In the finale, "Vida criolla," driving Caribbean rhythms and an increasingly exuberant vocal line culminate in a decisive cadence. Through these settings, Sierra reimagines Lloréns Torres's nationalist poetry from a contemporary perspective, celebrating Puerto Rican identity through a musical language that embraces Spanish poetic heritage and Afro-Caribbean musical tradition.

JULIA DE BURGOS (1914–1953) was a Puerto Rican poet, educator, and nationalist whose work explored identity, feminism, love, and the immigrant experience. Her poetry combines deeply personal reflection with a commitment to social and cultural independence. After moving to New York, she wrote about the isolation and struggles of immigrant life, becoming an important precursor to the Nuyorican literary movement. Though she died in obscurity, her work has since received renewed recognition for its emotional directness and social vision.

Roberto Sierra's ***JULIA*** draws on six poems spanning different periods of de Burgos' life and work. Unlike his earlier cycles, which often foreground Caribbean dance rhythms, *Julia* emphasizes lyrical introspection, recitative-like passages, and flexible musical pacing. In "Amante," sustained piano sonorities and distant, birdlike gestures evoke the intimacy of a union with nature. "Oh pájaro de amor" develops the bird imagery through virtuosic piano writing, transforming the symbol of love into a reminder of failed relationships. The following "Momentos" and "Interrogaciones" turn inward, pairing tonal instability, angular melodies, and shifting tempos with the poet's existential questioning and defiance.

The cycle's final songs return to nature imagery. "Cantar marinero" paints the movement of the sea through a fluid barcarolle and shifting rhythmic patterns, while "Canción hacia adentro" builds around repeated pleas for emotional connection. Its persistent evasion of resolution underscores both the speaker's unanswered appeals and the tragic isolation that marked de Burgos' final years. Through this intimate setting, Sierra brings renewed attention to a remarkable poet whose work continues to resonate across generations.

Projected translations adapted from Roberto and Virginia Sierra[1]

Program notes prepared by Eric Laine[2]

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[1] Robert Sierra, trans., preface to *Cinco Poemas Aztecas (Five Aztec Poems): for Voice and Piano*, composed by Roberto Sierra (Verona, NJ: Subito Music Publishing, 1995), ii–iii; Roberto Sierra, trans., preface to *Rimas: for Voice & Piano*, composed by Roberto Sierra (Verona, NJ: Subito Music Publishing, 1999); Virginia Sierra, trans., preface to *Décimas: for High Voice & Piano*, composed by Roberto Sierra (Verona, NJ: Subito Music Publishing, 2013); Virginia Sierra, trans., preface to *Julia: for High Voice & Piano*, composed by Roberto Sierra (Verona, NJ: Subito Music Publishing, 2015).

[2] Paraphrased from Eric Laine, *Reframing the Puerto Rican Art Song as a Latin American and US Genre: Five Representative Works by Roberto Sierra* (DMA diss., University of Houston, 2024).

Projected Artwork[3]



Artist Bios



For more than four decades, the works of Grammy-nominated and Latin Grammy-winning **ROBERTO SIERRA** have been part of the repertoire of many of the leading orchestras, ensembles, and festivals in the USA and Europe. At the inaugural concert of the 2002 world-renowned Proms in London, his Fandangos was performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, a concert broadcast by both BBC Radio and Television throughout the UK and Europe. Many major American and European orchestras and international ensembles have commissioned and performed his works. Among those ensembles are the orchestras of Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, New Mexico, Houston, Minnesota, Dallas, Detroit, San Antonio and Phoenix, as well as the American Composers Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, National Symphony Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Tonhalle Orchestra of Zurich, Berlin Philharmonic, and the Spanish orchestras of Madrid, Galicia, Castilla y León, Barcelona, and Murcia.

Commissioned works include: Concerto for Orchestra for the centennial celebrations of the Philadelphia Orchestra commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation and the Philadelphia Orchestra; Concerto for Saxophones and Orchestra commissioned by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra for James Carter; Fandangos and

[3] Larry Frank, *Callejon de Hamel* (2021), photograph; Gustave Moreau, *Orphée* (1865), oil on wood; Galina Victoria, *Isla del Encanto* (2014), acrylic on canvas; Jody Hewgill, *Julia de Burgos* (2010), portrait for the U.S. Postal Service commemorative stamp.

Missa Latina commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington DC; Sinfonía No. 3 "La Salsa", commissioned by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra; Danzas Concertantes for guitar and orchestra commissioned by the Orquesta de Castilla y León; Double Concerto for violin and viola co-commissioned by the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia Orchestras; Bongo+ commissioned by the Juilliard School in celebration of the 100th anniversary; Songs from the Diaspora commissioned by Music Accord for Heidi Grant Murphy, Kevin Murphy and the St. Lawrence String Quartet; and Concierto de Cámara co-commissioned by the the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Chamber Music Northwest and Stanford Lively Arts.

In 2021, Roberto Sierra was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 2017, he was awarded the Tomás Luis de Victoria Prize, the highest honor given in Spain to a composer of Spanish or Latin American origin. In 2010, he was elected to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2003, he was awarded the Academy Award in Music by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The award states: "Roberto Sierra writes brilliant music, mixing fresh and personal melodic lines with sparkling harmonies and striking rhythms. . ." His Sinfonía No. 1, a work commissioned by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, won the 2004 Kenneth Davenport Competition for Orchestral Works. In 2007, the Serge and Olga Koussevitzky International Recording Award (KIRA) was awarded to Albany Records for the recording of his composition Sinfonía No. 3 “La Salsa”. Roberto Sierra has served as Composer-In-Residence with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, The Philadelphia Orchestra, The Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra and New Mexico Symphony.

Roberto Sierra's Music may be heard on CDs by Naxos, EMI, IBS Classics, UMG’s EMARCY, New World Records, Albany Records, Koch, New Albion, Koss Classics, BMG, Fleur de Son, and other labels. In 2011, UMG’s EMARCY label released Caribbean Rhapsody featuring the Concierto for Saxophones and Orchestra, commissioned and premiered by the DSO with James Carter. In 2004, EMI Classics released his two guitar concertos, Folias and Concierto Barroco, with Manuel Barrueco as soloist (released in the USA by Koch in 2005). Sierra has been nominated twice for a Grammy under the best contemporary composition category, first in 2009 for Missa Latina (Naxos) and in 2014 for his Sinfonia No. 4 (Naxos). In addition, his Variations on a Souvenir (ALbany) and Trio No. 4 (Centaur) were nominated for Latin Grammys in 2009 and 2015. In 2021, his Sonata para Guitarra won the Latin Grammy for Best Classical Contemporary Composition.

Roberto Sierra was born in 1953 in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico. He studied composition in Puerto Rico and Europe, where one of his teachers was György Ligeti at the Hochschule für Musik in Hamburg, Germany. The works of Roberto Sierra are published principally by Subito Music Publishing (ASCAP).[4]



Acknowledged for his “vocal allure” and “fiery declamation” (*San Diego Story*), **ERIC LAINE**, tenor, has earned recognition as an innovative artist both on stage and in recital. He made his European debut as Il Podestà in *La finata giardiniera* with the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest, a role he later reprised with Opera Neo in San Diego, CA. On the operatic stage, Dr. Laine has sung Joante in the American premiere of *Apollo y Dafne*, Alfred and Dr. Blind in *Die Fledermaus*, Jay in *The Stranger’s Tale*, Male Chorus in *The Rape of Lucretia*, Vašek in *The Bartered Bride*, Henrik in *A Little Night Music*, the title role in *Albert Herring*, Don Ramiro in *La Cenerentola*, Tantale in *La descente*

[4] Roberto Sierra, “Bio,” *Roberto Sierra*, accessed September 15, 2026, https://www.robertosierra.com/markdown/.

d'Orphée aux enfers, Ferrando in *Così fan tutte*, Noël in *Le testament de la tante Caroline*, Apollo in the American premiere of *Coronide*, and Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw*, appearing with companies such as Orchestra of New Spain, First Coast Opera, Moores Opera Center, American Baroque Opera Co., Opera in the Heights, and Red River Lyric Opera, among others. During the 2016–17 and 2017–18 seasons, Laine was a regular ensemble member with Houston Grand Opera.

As a concert soloist, Laine has been featured in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, *Messiah, Alexander's Feast*, *Missa in Angustiis*, *Membra Jesu nostri*, *Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi*, Bruckner's Te Deum, Schubert's Mass No. 2 in G Major, Pergolesi's *Miserere,* Puccini's *Messa di Gloria*, Esmail's *This Love Between Us*, and many cantatas by J.S. Bach, having sung with Mercury Chamber Orchestra, Choral Society of Greensboro, Harmonia Stellarum Houston, Charlotte Music Club, Symphony of the Hills, Bach Charlotte Music by Women Festival, Boston Early Music Festival, Heart of the Triangle Choral Society, Houston Symphony, Incarnatus, Raleigh Camerata, Fort Bend Symphony Orchestra, Musica Sacra San Antonio, Winston-Salem Mozart Club, Houston Masterworks Chorus, and Tyler Civic Chorale. An avid promoter of art song, Laine frequently creates themed programs that pair chamber music with visual art, performing with organizations such as Cincinnati Song Initiative and Toronto Summer Music.

Laine received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in vocal performance and pedagogy from the University of Houston Moores School of Music. Additionally, he holds a Master of Music in vocal performance from the University of North Texas and earned a Bachelor of Music in music education from UH, with a dual focus in voice and classical saxophone. A trained vocologist through the Utah Center for Vocology in Salt Lake City, UT, Laine studied under the tutelage of Dr. Ingo Titze and Dr. Katherine Verdolini Abbott. He is a published author in the *Journal of Singing*, and his research interests include Latin American art song repertoire, vocal agility, and the intersection of exercise science and vocal pedagogy. Laine currently serves on the faculty of Texas Christian University as Assistant Professor of Voice.



Taiwanese pianist **CECILIA LO-CHIEN KAO** is a dynamic performer that is in demand as a chamber musician. She has collaborated with several distinguished artists including Lynn Harrell, Stefan Jackiw, Robert McDuffie, James Marckey, Bion Tsang, David Coucheron, and Jennifer Stumm, members of the Tokyo, Emerson, Juilliard String Quartets, among many others.

Kao is an Associate Professor of Professional Practice in Collaborative Piano at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. She is also the Co-founder and Artistic Director of the Scheherazade Music Festival in Kansas City and the Coordinator of Collaborative Piano at the prestigious Meadowmount School of Music in Westport, New York. She has been a collaborative pianist at Columbus State University and Mercer University in Georgia, where she worked with students of the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings.

She has appeared at Carnegie Weill Hall and can be heard with cellist Bion Tsang on his CD *The Blue Rock Sessions*. She was also a founding member of the Boulder Altitude Directive, a modern music ensemble dedicated to commissioning and performing new music, during their inaugural season. Kao has received fellowships for both the Aspen School of Music and the Music Academy of the West. She also was a chamber music artist at the Amelia Island Chamber Music Festival in Florida.

Kao holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Collaborative Piano from the University of Colorado Boulder and a Master of Music degree in Collaborative Piano from the

University of Texas at Austin, where she studied with the pioneer pedagogue, Anne Epperson. Prior to her move to the U.S., she was one of the first pianists to receive the Master of Arts degree in Collaborative Piano from National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei, where she also received her bachelor's degree in Piano Performance.

Cecilia Lo-Chien Kao is a Yamaha Performing Artist.

Please join us for the remainder of this week's events!

