MIRANDA CUCKSON BLAIR McMILLEN

BALLADS



BALLADS

1	**Manuel Ponce**: *Canción de otono [Song of autumn]*	2:18
2	**Robert Cuckson**: *Boat of Ra*	5:22
3	**Paolo Marchettini**: *Dialogo nascosto [Hidden dialogue]*	5:46
4	**Michelle Barzel Ross**: *Where things weigh nothing at all**	8:00
5	**Billy Jim Layton**: *Five Studies for violin and piano, Op. 1*—Study No. 2	3:42
6	**Quincy Jones**, arr. **Blair McMillen**: *The midnight sun never sets*	3:52
7	**Matthew Aucoin**: *Behind air's wall*	3:40
8	**Zosha di Castri**: *Sprung Testament*—Tears of elation at a liminal moment	4:14
9	**Toshio Hosokawa**: *Lied II [Song II]**	6:41
10	**Francesco Landini**, arr. **Blair McMillen**: *Non arà ma' pietà questa mie donna [She shows me no mercy]**	4:45
11	**James Primosch**: *Five Poems for violin and piano*—Nightsong	4:58
12	**Lili Boulanger**: *Nocturne*	2:54
13	**Johnny Green** & **Coleman Hawkins**, transcr. & arr. **Ethan Iverson**: *Hawk's Famous Solo on "Body and Soul" (for Miranda)**	5:00

MIRANDA CUCKSON, violin & *viola
BLAIR McMILLEN, piano

Recorded January 7 & 8, 2026 at Studio 543, The Juilliard School, New York
Sascha von Oertzen, recording engineer
Produced and edited by **Miranda Cuckson** and **Gene Gaudette**
Cover art: "Flower Clouds", Odilon Redon, 1903
Photos: Longfei Li (Miranda Cuckson), Richard Termine (Blair McMillen)

We all have melodies and songs that we love, and I wanted to make an album like this for quite a while.

When I brought my “ballads album” idea to record producer Gene Gaudette and pianist Blair McMillen, I had a handful of classical and contemporary pieces in mind, and a few jazz ballads. As we talked and I reached out to composer colleagues, the program took shape. Recently composed or arranged, or from the 20th century, these thirteen pieces evoke various kinds of “ballad”: the 19th-century instrumental ballade that tells a story; the jazz ballad, i.e. moody and romantic songs; and the medieval ballata, a poetic and musical form with a refrain, that was also intended for dance.

Several friends contributed new inventive arrangements. Matthew Aucoin wrote an adaptation of a song from a cycle he composed the same year, Blair McMillen arranged famous songs by Quincy Jones and Francesco Landini, and Ethan Iverson offered up a re-imagining of an iconic Coleman Hawkins solo.

The compositions on this album are mostly very melodic, but a few are more fragmented, even pointillistic, and not so obviously song-like or cantabile. I chose them because of their suggestion of long lines and connection across individual moments, and for the lyrical sentiments that I feel the music still conveys.

While considering and discussing pieces to play, I also conceived of this album as a sequence to be listened to and experienced from start to end. In addition to the musical segues, there are poetic threads interwoven throughout, including: the physical and spiritual (presence/absence); the sad/happy mélange of the blues; and the passage of the sun. The sequence suggests the arc of the sun rising and setting into night, with liminal or complicated states along the way, and associated feelings of lightness, connection, possibility, despair, hope.

I was also interested in how, in the juxtaposing and remaking of pieces, emotions mingle in changing, sometimes contrasting, layers, and moods and meanings accrue as artists absorb and use existing art to express themselves.

Sincere and deep thanks to all the remarkable musicians that are part of this album.

Hope you enjoy this lyrical voyage.

— Miranda Cuckson

Manuel Ponce (1882-1948) brought the folklore and street music of Mexico together with European concert music. He composed *Cancion de otoño (Autumn Song)* circa 1920 and presented it as a gift to a violinist friend at a birthday party.

In his piece *Boat of Ra* (2014), composer **Robert Cuckson** musically depicts the ancient Egyptian sun god Ra's daily journey. In the score, he quotes E. A. Wallis Budge, who wrote in 1920 about the tales contained in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*: "Rā sailed over the sky in two boats; his morning boat was called Mānchet and his evening boat Semktet. His course was guided by Maāt, the personification of law, order and unfailing regularity. After he set in the west in the evening, he entered the Underworld, and by the help of the gods who were there, and by the power which he possessed in his own person, he passed through that region successfully and appeared in the sky of this world the next morning in his usual form."

Italian composer and clarinetist **Paolo Marchettini**: "*Dialogo Nascosto (Hidden Dialogue)* for violin and piano (2017), is conceived as a dialogue between two people who are distant. The piece tries to recreate the feelings of a dialogue of thoughts, with someone who is not physically present, but truly present in the heart."

Violinist, composer, and improviser **Michelle Barzel Ross** about *Where things weigh nothing at all* (2020): "The piece begins and ends in a dream state. The viola and piano weave in and out of each other's awareness, and along with the listener, travel between the interior or exterior worlds…The title is a line from my favorite Milan Kundera novel - *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. This is one of many allusions that weave in and out of the subconscious of the piece, such as a fragment of a Gregorian chant that hung above my piano where I composed the work…The beginning of the score indicates to the performers: "walking together, unknowingly", as if they are singing the same fragments of this chant across different realms, different times - mirroring the mysteries of the compositional process itself."

Billy Jim Layton (1924-2004) started in music as a jazz saxophonist and clarinetist, and turned to classical composition and academia after World War II. The piece on this recording is the second of his *Five Studies* for violin and piano (1952). The violin is played with a mute throughout. The movement is, Layton wrote, "mainly a written-out improvisation in the violin around a simple blues-like melody in the piano."

Blair McMillen on his arrangement of *The midnight sun will never set* by composer/producer **Quincy Jones** (1933-2024): "Quincy Jones was performing in Stockholm in 1958 with the Swedish Radio Studio Orchestra, the summer he wrote *The midnight sun will never set*. The melody seems to capture the feeling of the midnight sun that never dips below the horizon, the late-night solstice of summer that Scandinavians know well, and that must have profoundly affected the young Quincy Jones. The haunting, flowing tune begins and ends on middle C, our "horizon note," which we never dip below. Throughout, there is a feeling that the melody never quite comes to rest; that it rises and falls, but floats continuously. I opted to turn the middle into a propulsive rhythmically-driven section, using elements of the tune and its harmonies."

The opening lyrics:

The midnight sun will never set
It shines forever in my heart
For it was underneath that amber glow
You whispered low
"We'll never part"

The midnight sun will never set
So now could our romance be through?
For in the ever-shining daylight of our summer love
The midnight sun was shining too.

Matthew Aucoin: "*behind air's wall* (2025) is a fantasy on, or creative transcription of, a song of the same name from my cycle *The Inner Core*. *behind air's wall* marks the conclusion of that cycle of love songs: it's a melancholy song of renunciation and acceptance. The violin/piano version begins austerely, with a sustained D and a spare, periodically repeating rhythm that leaves room for the violin's quietly yearning melody. In the piece's postlude, a new warmth and tenderness flood in."

The lyrics (by Matthew) of his original song:

and you are not
behind air's wall

and the wind carries no
shine of you and where

we live air is not
and death would not be closer

and I love you, no atom
of us has found nature

no atom will

I am going to love you

Zosha di Castri's *Tears of elation at a liminal moment* is the middle movement of her three-movement work for violin and piano from 2018, *Sprung Testament*, which was commissioned to be performed as a companion piece to Ludwig van Beethoven's "Spring" Sonata, Op. 24.

She writes that, in addition to ideas stimulated by Beethoven's vivacious and stormy Spring Sonata, "[a] source of inspiration for the project was the discovery of Rose-Lyn Fisher's stunning book *The Topography of Tears*. I was immediately drawn to her duotone microscopic photographs of tears captured on glass slides. These images reminded me of macro-topographic shots of sprawling landscapes, yet were also weirdly delicate, poetically complex, and intimate. In her book, Fisher gives captions to each image, translating the visuals into something evocative of our interior lives."

Toshio Hosokawa: "*Lied II (Song II)* is an arrangement for viola, created in 2008 at the request of violist Nobuko Imai, based on my 2007 composition *Lied* for flute and piano. I believe that the essence of my music is song. An instrument is an extension of the human voice. In this piece, the viola serves as an extension of the voice, while the piano represents its background, nature, and the universe. Reflecting the vocal traditions of East Asian music, the shape of the song resembles the lines of brush calligraphy. Instead of straight lines, it forms curved lines enriched with various ornaments, subtle vibratos, and portamentos. Through its dialogue and confrontation with nature, the song ultimately arrives at a prayer for harmony."

Non ara ma pietà ma questa donna (My lady will never show me pity) by **Francesco Landini** (ca. 1325-1397), *a*rranged for viola and piano by **Blair McMillen**: "Medieval Italian *ballata* were story-telling love songs with a musical form usually including at least one refrain, a later repetition of a section from earlier in the piece. For this arrangement, I tried to balance a Romantic elasticity with the strict form and dance-like spirit of Landini's *Non ara ma pietà*. The piece begins with musicians tuning, warming up, and improvising. We hear snippets of melodies that will soon be sung and danced to, and several lively sections follow, with rhythmic counterpoint and interplay between the performers. Towards the conclusion, the music stops suddenly, the exhausted dancers lay down to rest, and the musicians then play a refrain to round out the festivities."

My lady will never show me pity
Unless you ensure, O Love,
That she is certain of my great ardor.

If she knew the pain I bear—
Concealed within my mind out of propriety,
Born solely of her beauty, for my sorrowing soul
Finds comfort in nothing else—

Perhaps she would extinguish within me
The flames that, day by day,
Increase the anguish in my heart.

James Primosch (1956-2021) was an American classical composer and pianist, and was also active in jazz and liturgical music. *Nightsong* is the third of his *Five Poems* for violin and piano (2015). While a couple of the movements were inspired by actual poems (by Susan Stewart and Robert Frost), the other three movements are more abstractly expressive. In his program note, Primosch wrote: "*Nightsong* is a bluesy lullaby that turns highly dramatic."

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) was a precocious talent who was recognized for her compositional craft and the emotional depth of her music. Ill for much of her very short life, she was from a remarkable family of musicians. She composed her *Nocturne* for violin and piano in 1911.

Pianist and composer **Ethan Iverson** on *Hawk's Famous Solo (for Miranda)*:

"*Body and Soul* (1930) is one of the original torch songs, that mix of Broadway and blues brought to apotheosis by Billie Holiday. Coleman Hawkins' recording in 1939 was popular at the time of its release before going on to be one of the most celebrated and influential of jazz improvisations. Hawkins discards the original theme by Johnny Green after three or four bars - which led to Thelonious Monk asking him, 'How did you make a hit record without playing the melody?' In the score, I suggest the players could take something of a 'café attitude': they have free rein for dynamics, articulations, and even pitches. To my delight, Miranda took on the challenge of writing/improvising a cadenza with gusto; the substantial solo viola moment near the end is from her own imagination, and happily pulls together the threads of torch song, jazz, and new music."

The song's opening lyrics:

My heart is sad and lonely.
For you I sigh, for you dear only.
Why haven't you seen it?
I'm all for you, body and soul.

I spend my days in longing.
I'm wondering why it's me you're wronging.
I tell you I mean it,
I'm all for you, body and soul.

— **Miranda Cuckson**



"Miranda Cuckson is a poetic soloist with a strong personality, yet unpretentious."—*Die Presse*, Vienna
"Her tonal luster and variety of touch enliven everything she plays."—*The New York Times*
"[A]stonishing technique, pinpoint control and impeccable intonation… no wonder she's been a new-music violinist of choice for decades."–*Gramophone*

Violinist/violist **Miranda Cuckson,** acclaimed as a soloist and collaborator, delights audiences with her performances of music ranging from earlier eras to the newest creations. Engaging with musical avenues including those of Western classical traditions and various tributaries of American music, she has pursued a personal path motivated by sincere interest, innovation, and exploration, the expression of any human feelings and experiences, and the realization of virtuosity, craft, and invention.

She is a featured artist at festivals internationally, including Wien Modern, Grafenegg, Lincoln Center, Mito, Ojai, Le GuessWho, West Cork, Bard, Frequency, TimeSpans, and Sinus Ton, and by such presenters as St. Paul's Liquid Music, 92NY, Miller Theatre, Suntory Hall, Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes, Teatro Colón, Library of Congress, Cleveland Museum, San Francisco Performances, Isabella Gardner Museum, and Detroit Institute of Art.

Miranda premiered Georg Friedrich Haas's *Violin Concerto No. 2* in four countries and made her solo debut at the Vienna Musikverein with this piece in 2023. The live recording of that performance has been released on Urlicht AudioVisual. Her other widely-lauded recordings include *Világ* featuring Bartók's *Solo Sonata* and folk-flavored compositions; Ligeti's *Violin Concerto*, released on Centaur Records to great acclaim.; the Korngold, Ponce, and Piston concertos on Centaur; Bartók, Schnittke, and Lutoslawski on ECM; Harold Meltzer's Grammy-nominated *Songs and Structures*; Michael Hersch's the *wreckage of flowers*; and *Melting the darkness*, a forward-looking compilation of microtonal/electronic music. Her album of Luigi Nono's *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura* was named a Recording of the Year by *The New York Times*.

Miranda is passionate about all the arts and is a core member of the American Modern Opera Company (AMOC*), an interdisciplinary collective that has been featured at the Ojai and Lincoln Center Festivals. She founded the non-profit Nunc and has been noted throughout her career for her venturesome and thoughtfully threaded programming and curation.

Miranda teaches violin and chamber music at Mannes School of Music/New School University. She frequently writes and speaks to audiences about music and she holds a doctorate from The Juilliard School.



Hailed by *The New York Times* as "prodigiously accomplished and exciting" and as one of the piano's "brilliant stars," pianist **Blair McMillen** has forged a musical life that is unbounded by convention. He is well-known for his advocacy of living composers and contemporary music, as well as for championing very early keyboard music and more recent neglected masterpieces. For more than two decades, McMillen has divided his time as piano soloist, chamber musician, music festival director, and educator/teacher.

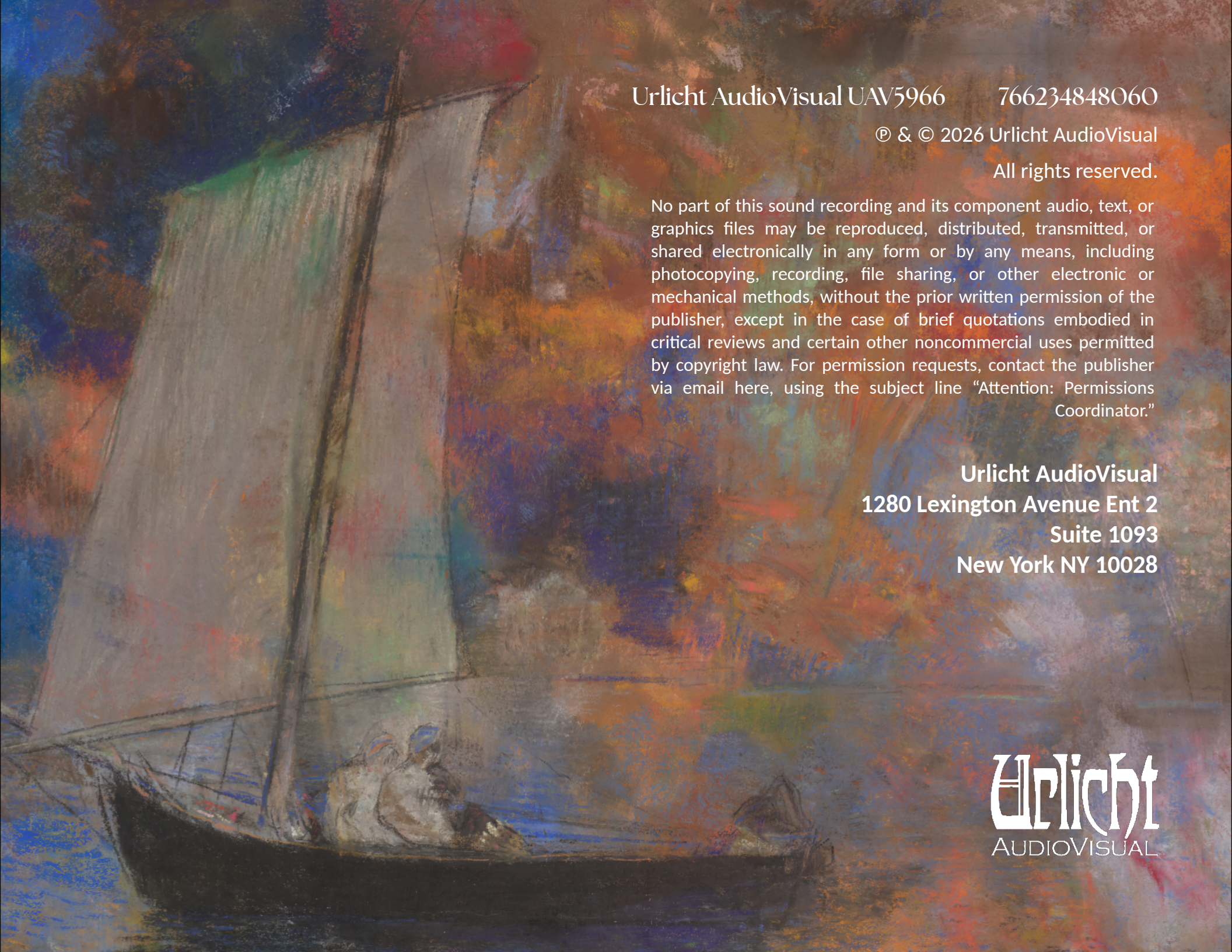
McMillen has performed in major concert venues in New York, throughout the United States, and around the world. He is a member of several prominent ensembles, including the American Modern Ensemble, the six-piano "supergroup" Grand Band, and the Perspectives Ensemble. For 10 years he was pianist for the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players. He has also performed with the International Contemporary Ensemble, the Knights, and the LPR Ensemble.

As a teacher and pedagogue, McMillen is in high demand. He has taught at Bard College and Conservatory since 2005, and he serves on the piano and collaborative piano faculty at Mannes at the New School in New York City. He regularly adjudicates at competitions and festivals throughout the United States and abroad. In past summers, McMillen has taught at the Elm City Chamber Festival, the Xi'an Festival, the Wellesley Composers Conference, the Samuel Barber Institute, FEMUSC (Brazil), and the Bennington Chamber Music Festival, to name a few.

His first solo CD "Soundings," was released to critical acclaim in 2001. Since then, Blair McMillen has been featured on dozens of commercially-released solo, chamber, and orchestral recordings. An ECM recording with Miranda Cuckson was hailed by The Guardian for "…playing that is frank and urgent, with powerfully stripped-back quiet passages and gritted-teeth ecstatic climaxes."

McMillen is the co-founder and co-director of the Rite of Summer Music Festival, which has presented boundary-pushing artists such as the JACK Quartet, Bang on a Can All-Stars, Tigue, Theo Bleckmann, Todd Reynolds, Contemporaneous, and Don Byron's New Gospel Quintet.

McMillen holds degrees from Oberlin College, Manhattan School of Music, and The Juilliard School. His principal teachers have included Jerome Lowenthal, Robert McDonald, Sophia Rosoff, Joseph Kalichstein, and Byron Janis. He lives in New York with his wife Kay and son Conor. In his spare time he enjoys biking, skiing, film, and the occasional semi-competitive game of table tennis.



Urlicht AudioVisual UAV5966 7662348480600

℗ & © 2026 Urlicht AudioVisual

All rights reserved.

No part of this sound recording and its component audio, text, or graphics files may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, or shared electronically in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, file sharing, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact the publisher via email here, using the subject line “Attention: Permissions Coordinator.”

Urlicht AudioVisual
1280 Lexington Avenue Ent 2
Suite 1093
New York NY 10028

Urlicht
AUDIOVISUAL