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Lara Downes: Artist, Activist



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Lara Downes is not only a concert pianist sponsored by Yamaha; she is an artist who aims to use her talent and experience for social good. With much of her youth spent training in Europe, Lara returned to the United States with a refreshed and unique appreciation for her country of birth. Her albums *America Again* (2016) and *For Lenny* (2018) reflect inspiration she has drawn from both major and neglected figures in American music. Public service and social justice have been a reliable part of Lara's musical tours. Classroom visits have brought children into contact with the artist, who motivates them with stories from the past and messages for the future. Lara's latest endeavor, *Holes in the Sky*, is a celebration of female composers and performers. Attaching a social component is likewise a priority for Lara, who has now organized a partnership with children's rights advocate Plan International and her sponsor Yamaha. The case challenges the reader to strengthen this promising partnership and propose ideas for global reach of the program.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lara Downes". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Lara" and "Downes" being capitalized and prominent.

This case study was prepared by Michael Alan Anderson at the Eastman School of Music. **The Eastman Case Studies** are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

American in Paris

"I'm not interested in putting on a fancy dress, playing my concert, having the audience clap, and then leaving the stage. It's more complex than that." The notion of using musical performances as a gateway to other objectives is central to Lara Downes, a mid-career concert pianist sponsored by Yamaha. Lara is more than a pianist: she is also a writer, curator, and radio producer. But above all she is a social activist, a role shared by a growing number of music professionals. The accolades from Lara's piano playing alone would suffice for many aspiring artists. She has earned plaudits from National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Fanfare Magazine* and has also appeared at major venues from Carnegie Hall to the Kennedy Center with performances that link musical genres and cultural traditions. Lara's recordings further have appeared on the top of the Billboard charts. In her roles as producer and host of the radio program *The Green Room*, distributed nationally by WFMT Chicago, she chronicles the lives of classical

musicians with her infectious enthusiasm. Ever conscious of her social circumstances and historical position, Lara Downes is a musical artist willing to disrupt norms to achieve noble aims. She is a dreamer.

Lara Downes is a musical artist willing to disrupt norms to achieve noble aims.

One need not look further than Lara's parents to trace her idealism. She was born in San Francisco to a Jamaican father from Harlem, who was a scientist, and a Jewish mother from Eastern Europe, who was a civil rights lawyer. Lara's father was the dreamer; her mother, the practical doer. Their friends were black and white—writers, musicians, artists, teachers, lawyers, and importantly, activists who had marched on Washington and ridden buses to Mississippi in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights movement. According to Lara, "They believed in changing the world; they were changing it." Lara and her two sisters took piano lessons from a very young age. Lara's eyes

were opened when she began to study with Adolph Baller at Stanford University around age eight. Her Austrian teacher had studied with a student of Franz Liszt and had performed as soloist with the Vienna Philharmonic when he was only 13, but his life was unspeakably altered under the Nazi regime. Baller was held in a concentration camp where his captors beat him and intentionally crushed his hands. He was able to escape and emigrated to the United States, where he resumed a musical career as violinist Yehudi Menuhin's collaborative pianist. Baller's story gave Lara keen insight into the role of music in one's life, especially "the strength that can be found in one's calling throughout personal tragedy and upheaval." Her studio experience with Baller marked a turning point for the young pianist.

Lara and her sisters also sang in the children's chorus of the San Francisco Opera. It was here that Lara encountered the great African-American soprano Leontyne Price. That brush with a person of color on the concert stage was crucial for the impressionable musician. "If I'd believed that classical music was all white, I don't know if I would have kept going." Lara's father died when she was just nine years old, and her mom decided to move to Paris to raise the trio of talented girls. Roaming Europe as one does on extended stays, the family's friends were "musicians and artists from everywhere; a jumble of languages—French, German, Russian, Spanish—flowed around every dinner table."

Lara's diverse heritage and already rich artistic experiences were hardly suppressed in her time overseas. The European appetite for art music was palpable and awe-inspiring for the young musician. Lara remembered that "subways and buses were full of commuters carrying violin and cello cases. Young people stood in line for hours to buy cheap student tickets at the opera." Pursuing classical music in Europe was not just culturally acceptable; it was encouraged. "My teachers were only a few generations and degrees of separation from Brahms

and Rachmaninoff. The ghosts of the great composers were tangibly present in the air we breathed and the streets we walked,” Lara recalled about her new home. She and her sisters continued to study piano at top conservatories with legendary teachers. She practiced the piano eight hours per day, nurturing her skill with canonic repertoire like Beethoven sonatas and Chopin preludes. By age 17, she had made appearances at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, the Vienna Konzerthaus, and La Salle Gaveau in Paris. Billed as the “American Downes Sisters” and wearing matching dresses in concert, she and her sisters won prizes for their playing.

Naturally, ties to—and feelings for—the United States faded for the itinerant Lara Downes. Yet, she listened voraciously to John Coltrane and other jazz artists in her teens, forming strong feelings about the spirit of the United States in her music-making and worldview more generally. When she did move back to the States, as the result of a romantic relationship, she felt the cultural disconnect of her years abroad and wondered what kind of “American life” awaited her in her country of birth. While visiting an exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Lara had another moment of truth: “It showed me the history of music in the 20th century and how it connected to American culture. It was an epiphany, the idea of what music could mean to me. It set me on the path to creating personal context behind what I do musically.”

America Again and a Promise

Having returned to the United States, Lara took time to reflect on her life. She found it full of “contradictions and contrasts,” but these incongruities were, as she saw it, a very “American” quality to her personality. In her years abroad, Lara had found in American music a refuge and a voice that spoke to her. She recalled the jazz albums her father played for her at night, from Billie Holiday and Miles Davis to Duke Ellington and George Gershwin. Something in this pantheon of American musicians resonated deep within her. “Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* and Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*

awakened my childhood hunger for the mythology, the dream of normal, the wheat fields, baseball games, and ice cream sundaes of some American fantasy that no one has ever really lived.”

Growing up in Europe, Lara learned music by American composers and believed that those styles merited her attention. Her teachers, on the other hand, saw her forays into American music as unworthy of serious study and instead encouraged a steady diet of the European masterworks for the pianist. As Lara absorbed the repertoire, she began to see not only the interconnections between these diverse American styles and artists from the past but also the distinct path they each forged as American musicians. “I’ve learned that there are an infinite number of ways to be an American,” she averred. “There is no such thing as a typical American life, and there are millions of American stories. I’ve learned that what is most beautiful about me comes down to my contradictions and contrasts.”

June 17, 2015 is an unforgettable date in Lara’s mind. On this infamous day, nine African Americans were killed by gunfire during a prayer service at an African Methodist Episcopal church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. These murders at the hands of a white supremacist shocked and saddened Lara as she sat in her kitchen listening to the news. She was troubled that “these same old themes and their variations keep running through our American story.” Lara could not help but take action—action through her art. That

*“Copland’s **Appalachian Spring** and Gershwin’s **Rhapsody in Blue** awakened my childhood hunger for the mythology, the dream of normal, the wheat fields, baseball games, and ice cream sundaes of some American fantasy that no one has ever really lived.”*

– Lara Downes

same day, she called her record label to postpone an existing project to make room for something new, something *American*. Lara revealed, “I felt urgently that it was the moment to tell the story of what I’ve learned about American music—or maybe about being an American.”

When she heard about the Charleston shooting, Lara was reminded of a 1935 poem by Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again.” Hughes’s poem, which speaks for hard-working and marginalized Americans, was raw and critical toward the United States (“America never was America to me”). But the poem was ultimately hopeful in its outlook that the country’s best days were ahead of it. Lara channeled this spirit into her project *America Again*, borrowing from the poem’s title. Under this provocative heading, she aimed to use her music to say something about her identity as an American and the multivalent meanings of being American. The result was a recording of solo piano works by American composers past and present, designed to show “the American story, the American experience, the American dream.” Highlighting American composers of all stripes—female and male; straight and gay; celebrated and unknown; black, white, and Latino—the album unveiled Lara’s deep awareness for social inequality and drew upon her deftness with a variety of musical styles to express her innermost feelings in sound.

Lara Downes’s 2016 album release *America Again* on the Sono Luminus label featured music from Amy Beach and George Gershwin to Scott Joplin and arrangements by Florence Price and Samuel Coleridge Taylor of African-American spirituals. She included new works as well, such as David Sanford’s “Promise,” written expressly for Lara’s project. The idea for “Promise” was inspired by former United States poet laureate Rita Dove’s “Testimonial” from her collection *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (2000). In the poem, a single sentence gave rise to Sanford’s piece: “I gave my promise to the world, and the world followed me here.” Sanford’s wistful, neo-Romantic “Promise” for solo

piano in turn prompted Lara to follow the aspirational quality of Dove’s text and repurpose it for social good.

Stirred by Sanford’s “Promise,” Lara developed a program with Rita Dove herself called the *My Promise Project*, a “community transformation initiative” centered on values of citizenship, community, compassion, communication, self-awareness, and self-esteem, through reflections on American history, poetry, and music. The initiative targets young people around the United States. The task is simple but powerful: record a 10-second video announcing your promise to the world.

These videos can be recorded on phones, and sometimes a sign is held up with the promise written out. Lara’s music and Dove’s poetry have created a compelling combination, prompting invitations from schools to presenters including the Ravinia Festival, Washington Performing Arts, and the Oregon Bach Festival.

In her interactions with kids, Downes introduces them to the poetry of Langston Hughes and asks them to speak about the meaning of the “American dream” as they understand it. What do they think it meant to their parents and grandparents? What is that dream today? What are their hopes for the United States? And ultimately: what is their promise to the world? The children are often shy at first, but then slowly speak up. They write their promises on signs and hold them high. Promises from students at a 2016 tour stop in Louisville, Kentucky are representative: “My Promise is to help people”; “My Promise is never to be a statistic”; “My Promise is to have confidence in my heart”; “My Promise is to see other people without discrimination”; “My Promise is to pursue my education.”

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promise to the
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**– Rita Dove, *On the
Bus with Rosa Parks***

The *My Promise Project* has changed Lara. She sees her role as something much loftier than being a performer: through the project, she now helps people find their dreams. Lara summarized: “I think that zeroing in now on what is our promise, what can we give, contribute, and promise to the future of our families, our communities, our nation, our planet—that’s what we need to be doing.” Lara’s promise to the world, for the record, “is to listen and learn.”

Music For Lenny

Lara Downes took many things from her *America Again* and *My Promise* projects. Three key ideas emerged from these endeavors—the satisfaction of artistic collaboration, the power of the American spirit, and service for the greater social good. 2018 was a “Bernstein year,” the centennial of the birth of American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein. It was to be an occasion celebrated widely by arts organizations around the world. A national icon, Bernstein fascinated Lara not only as a distinctive voice in the crowded artistic landscape of the United States, but also as an intense collaborator and even social activist. As a conductor, he shared the stage with countless musicians both as music director of the New York Philharmonic and as guest conductor of orchestras around the world. His anti-establishment views were also well known, but scarcely affected his impact or legacy.

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Lara found Bernstein to be a role model for a socially concerned musician, and she believed a tribute was in order for his centennial year, one that explored American music deeply in a way that would draw inspiration from Bernstein. The composer’s *Anniversaries* for solo of piano especially appealed to Lara, as she had already performed and recorded

some of them. Written over the course of two generations, these pieces were personal reflections on people important to Bernstein (e.g., *For Aaron Copland* [1942]; *For My Sister, Shirley* [1942]; *For Stephen Sondheim* [1988]). Lara thought it would be meaningful to design a project with a similar theme, but turned on its head: “Anniversaries for Lenny.” She figured she could ask various composers to each contribute a piece about the American icon, not just celebrating the centennial anniversary of his birth, but also, as Lara put it, “sending back some love letters and birthday cards and thank you notes to the grandfather of us all.”

The musical tributes of the resulting album *For Lenny* (2018) on the Sony Classical label included new arrangements of Bernstein’s songs, as well as works dedicated to the composer-conductor by leading American composers such as Stephen Sondheim, Shulamit Ran, John Corigliano, Ned Rorem, and others. Lara further recruited an array of performers to appear on the album. This prestigious roster—all GRAMMY award winners—included baritone Thomas Hampson, country and blues artist Rhiannon Giddens, and beatboxer Kevin “K.O.” Olusola from the *a cappella* group Pentatonix. *For Lenny* debuted on the Billboard Top 20. Similar to the *America Again* recording, Lara then took the fruits of *For Lenny* on tour in the anniversary year in both big cities and small towns. “I’ve met so many people who have shared their Leonard Bernstein stories with me. It’s kind of staggering how many people have Lenny stories to share... To encounter him, however briefly, was to experience a larger-than-life force that would leave an indelible stamp on you forever. He changed so many lives for the better.” Lara’s included.

Lara likewise took her “Lenny” tour into classrooms around the country, again determined to make an impact with the country’s youngest listeners. In his time, Bernstein was well known for his *Young People’s Concerts*, a television series of more than 50 family-targeted episodes featuring the New York

Philharmonic and airing on CBS monthly from 1958 to 1972. In her classroom time with children, Lara played some of her favorite moments from Bernstein's *Young People's Concerts*. She also invited the kids to dance with her to Bernstein's music and introduced them to the composer's "Somewhere" (or "There's a Place for Us") from the 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story*. Lara and the children would listen to the song together. "I ask them to find their own 'somewhere place'. The littles ones draw their somewhere place for me, and the older students come up to the front of the room and tell their classmates about what they hope for in life, someday, somewhere. I believe they will find it." Lara's aim was Bernstein's: "music can change the world."

Holes in the Sky

An interviewer once asked Lara Downes about her experience as a female artist, wondering where she draws inspiration and what challenges lie ahead. Lara's past projects already demonstrate great pride in her native country, but in her answer to this typical question, she mentioned that she is inspired by the women who came before her, the ones whose pioneering experiences allowed her to take her own musical risks and forge a personal musical journey. Growing up in an all-female household after the passing of her father, Lara sought women role models as she trained in piano. Severely lacking were women in the history of music. Lara remembers her delight at discovering the music of Clara Schumann and Florence Price, as well as performers like Billie Holiday and Nina Simone. The gravity of their contributions was not lost on the impressionable Lara: "To rise up from the weight of petticoats and ladylike behavior, tyrannical fathers, overshadowing husbands, unchecked offspring – they were heroic, these women. They were giants."

The towering contributions of women would prompt Lara's next project, an endeavor fueled by both compositions and performances by women. "When I make music with other women, I feel a creative kinship, a common history that brought us here. We

have freedoms beyond any of our ancestors – even the mothers who raised us. We have very little, in the scope of things, to hold us down." Driving the project thematically was a quote from a letter by American painter Georgia O'Keeffe in 1916: "I want real things—live

people to take hold of—to see—and talk to—music that makes holes in the sky—I want to love as hard as I can..."¹ The phrase "music that makes holes in the sky" had stuck with Lara and drove her to title this next recording project *Holes in the Sky*. This undertaking would feature music of women and by women. Lara's intent was to showcase music by more than two dozen women she had encountered and cherished in her experience as a musician, women on a wide stylistic spectrum from Florence Price and Joni Mitchell to Meredith Monk and Jennifer Higdon. *Holes in the Sky* would further include commissions of new works from female composers (Elena Ruehr, Julia Adolphe, Clarice Assad, Angelica Negron, and Georgia Stitt). This relatively young roster of women represents a talented group, which could voice the dreams of an empowered generation. The composers will combine with a star-studded lineup of artists participating in *Holes in the Sky*. Rhiannon Giddens was an early sign-on to the project, and other guests followed from all corners of the musical world. Singers Judy Collins, Frederica von Stade, Alicia Hall Moran, and Hila Plitmann have joined, along with violinist Rachel Barton Pine, pianist Simone Dinnerstein, and others to form a virtuosic coterie of women, whom Lara has lovingly called "sisters already." The intended result is a recording and potential concert programming

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¹ See, for example, Clive Giboire, ed., *Lovingly, Georgia: The Complete Correspondence of Georgia O'Keeffe & Anita Pollitzer* (Touchstone Books, 1990), 123.

of piano, vocal, and chamber music, which honors women's hopes and lives.

Plan International and Digital Pen Pals

As with her other recording projects and concert touring, Lara is already thinking about attaching a socially beneficial initiative to her *Holes in the Sky* project. She has had successful classroom visits in the recent past, but the nature of the collaboration she has arranged seems to demand something on a larger scale. Lara has decided to partner with Plan International, an advocacy organization spanning 50 countries, which aims to advance children's rights in general and equality for girls in particular. The organization was a natural companion for the female-focused *Holes in the Sky* endeavor. Lara had centered her activist efforts on empowering children previously with the *My Promise Project*, and Plan International's

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mission rang consonant with the artist's broad and ambitious goals. Plan International asserts that "when we strengthen the health, knowledge, and resilience of a child, it doesn't just transform her life, it has ripple effects that carry through her family, her community, and ultimately, her nation." The worldwide children's campaign also could scale Lara's hopes on a global level to make a difference through her music.

Lara recently had a conference call with Plan International to discuss programs that would allow the pianist to inspire and connect children around the world with the recording. Plan International has agreed to

test some ideas when Lara appears in Washington DC in a few months under the sponsorship of Washington Performing Arts, not only a leading national concert presenter but also a co-commissioner of the entire *Holes in the Sky* endeavor. Classroom visits again would be a returning element of Lara's social work. During these visits, Plan International would supply both videos and handouts, which explain the meaning of children's empowerment and the benefits it provides to young people around the world. Developers at Plan International are at work on a digital platform that would connect the Washington DC-based students to children of similar ages from its global partners. The vision is to forge relationships from student to student through the medium—they are calling the endeavor "digital pen pals." When children in the various classes have established their "pen pals," some basic questions could be discussed between the students, led by a facilitator from Plan International. Students would gain an understanding and appreciation for what it is like to learn in a different part of the world.

Then comes the music. Being a Yamaha-sponsored artist, Lara has sought help from her sponsor in the spread of music from the *Holes in the Sky* project to children around the world. The Yamaha Corporation is considering ideas for how this program can use its Disklavier technology to help bring children together from disparate parts of the world closer together through music. Disklaviers are modern-day "player pianos," that is, regular acoustic pianos with digital enhancements that store and play back encoded performances, whether freshly performed "on the spot" at the piano or from pre-existing recordings. The self-playing pianos can be brought to locations determined by Plan International. Video and audio streaming technology with the Yamaha pianos could allow Lara to play music from her recording live in the United States, while the keys she plays are depressed in real time at Disklavier instruments positioned around the world. She can also discuss via videoconference the meaning of the music she is playing. Students

can also send and receive each other's songs via the Disklavier. There are many more possibilities for empowering children through the shared technology.

As the plan to connect children materializes, Lara is wondering how the new "digital pen pal" initiative through Plan International will fare. She is excited about the impact the technology will have on site, but is also thinking about how it can maximize impact around the world. Her sponsor has a limited number

of Disklaviers to deploy, for instance. Pen pals can be life changing for children, but the relationships formed also require periodic nourishing. Lara has told herself that this campaign should have "deliverables" in contrast to previous efforts where social components have seemed like "add-ons." The pianist is also hoping to sustain momentum from previous initiatives like the *My Promise Project*. Lara has a follow-up call with Plan International representatives and her contact from Yamaha in two weeks.



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