



VCU DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE

with special guest, Dr. Blake Tyson

Monday, October 30, 2017 at 7 p.m.

Sonia Vlahcevic Concert Hall | W. E. Singleton Center for the Performing Arts
922 Park Avenue | Richmond, Va.

Program

- Clapping Music.....Steve Reich (b. 1936)
Sky Ghost.....Russell Hartenberger (b. 1944)
The Surface of the Sky.....Blake Tyson (b.1969)
Nagoya Marimbas.....Steve Reich (b. 1936)
Can You See the Stars?.....Blake Tyson (b. 1969)
Promise Music.....Clif Walker (b. 1973)

VCU Percussion Ensemble

Matt Breaux
Charles Brown
Nick Bullard
Rohan Chartevedula
Bryan Connolly
Andrew Diehr
Sage Harrison

Collin Hopkins
Jaleel Jackson
John Kresge
Brian Larson
Ricardo Rodriguez
Kyle Stoker
Austin Tekamp

Blake Tyson's **The Surface of the Sky** was written to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the integration of Little Rock Central High School and is dedicated to the nine students who courageously led the way. In 1957, Little Rock Central High School became an international symbol of the fight against racial segregation and the struggle for equal rights in the United States. This is because there were nine students who tried to walk through the doors of the school, but who were turned away. They were turned away for only one reason. They were black.

Although there were those in the community and the state who supported desegregation, their voices were overwhelmed by the racism and anger of those who opposed it. The Governor of Arkansas sent the National Guard to the school not to protect the nine students, but to keep them out. Eventually, the President of the United States ordered the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock to escort the students into the school and to act as their personal bodyguards. Even then, each of the nine students faced constant mental and physical abuse inside the walls of Central High. Outside of school, they and their families faced further intimidation and attacks, as did anyone who might show them even the smallest kindness or sympathy. Their careers and their lives were threatened. The students turned to authority figures, to teachers and police, for help. They found little support or understanding. Somehow, these nine teenagers got up every day and went back to the school because they understood how important it was not just for them, but for all who would follow them.

Today, the images of the Little Rock Nine from 1957 have lost none of their power. Six decades later, not only do we see the the past in those photos; we see reflections of our own time. Ourselves. We see the best, and worst, of human nature. We see hate, bigotry, and fear juxtaposed with courage, bravery and resolve. The Surface of the Sky does not attempt to depict any specific event of the crisis through music. Instead, I've tried to find a way to honor the bravery and courage of the nine students through music. They truly risked everything to move us all forward. To stand up to the bullying, the threats, and the hatred took incredible strength and character from each one of them, and we all owe them our gratitude and our respect.

There is a reflecting pool in front of Central High School. Approaching the immense building, you see its now famous doorways reflected in the water. When I began writing the piece, I was using the title Reflecting Pool. It symbolized the idea of images from the past reflecting the present day, but I was never completely happy with the name. When I was very close to finishing the piece, I drove to Little Rock to visit the school again. I walked from the street, toward the school, and down to the pool. Approaching its edge, I noticed the reflection of the building began to recede as the sky overtook the water. I realized that I should have been looking up, not down; that the endless expanse of the sky, instead of a small pool of water, is a far better symbol of the accomplishments of the Little Rock Nine. They still radiate outward. They still touch our lives today. And they will continue to touch the lives of the generations that follow us.

The details of the past, no matter how significant, can fade and be lost to time. Carlotta Walls Lanier, one of the Little Rock Nine who regularly speaks to young students about her experiences, wrote that she is often asked questions like, "Why haven't I learned this in school before now?" It is a good question. I hope *The Surface of the Sky* will inspire the students who perform it, and the audiences who hear it, to learn more about the achievements of the Little Rock Nine and to discover more about the sacrifices made by all those who have fought against racism and injustice across our country. Learning more about our past will help us be kinder and more compassionate to those whose lives and struggles we do not yet understand. While hate and anger may make us feel strong, they do not actually make us strong. True strength lies in understanding and kindness, and it always will. —Blake Tyson

The Surface of the Sky was commissioned by the University of Central Arkansas College of Fine Arts and Communication. It is part of a project commemorating the events at Little Rock Central High School entitled "Imagine If Buildings Could Talk: Mapping the History of Little Rock's Central High School." The piece will be used as the soundtrack for a large-scale projection mapping, created by a team led by UCA professor Scott Meador, on the front of Central High during the weekend of the 60th Anniversary of the school's desegregation. The project is supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the National Park Service, the Mid-America Arts Alliance, the Windgate Charitable Foundation, and the Arkansas Arts Council. Special thanks to Dr. Gayle Seymour for her tireless leadership of the project.