

America Guitar 250

Aaron Larget-Caplan, Guitar

I grew up in Denver, Colorado, swimming in the sounds and stories of rock music from the '60s-80s—listening, reading, and dreaming. I did not know Civil War songs and stayed clear of patriotic ones. As a music student in Boston, I discovered Bernstein's *West Side Story*, alongside the works of John Cage, Alan Hovhaness, and other modern American composers.

As I delved deeper into the music and histories of these early American songs for this project, I became captivated by the stories and contexts of these songs—and by the gaps in the classical guitar's own repertoire. So began a journey to create an album that travels the soundscape of America: its ideals and contradictions, its reinventions and dreams, all through the guitar's voice and that represents my experience of America, *my America*.

The album can be broken into three sections with four spoken texts, two poems and an essay, read by musicians and poets, that exalt the power of music and its divinity with nature, and a fourth that amends the 10 Amendments of the *Bill of Rights*.

The only work for violin and guitar and by a woman, Florence Price's *Adoration*, sits at the midpoint and acts as an album pivot to the 20th and 21st centuries.

Interwoven are meditative reimaginings of John Cage's *Harmonies* from *Apartment House 1776*, bridging early American hymnody and the avant-garde, a young Alan Hovhaness, and living composers that harken back to our musical and city roots with David Liptak and Ian Wiese.

These originals, arrangements, and spoken texts, illuminate the evolving American sound—sacred and secular, celebratory and questioning—where history and imagination meet in dialogue through the guitar. *America Guitar 250* reflects the complexity of a nation through sound.

— Aaron Larget-Caplan

1 - America from *West Side Story*

Music by Leonard Bernstein, Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, Arr. by Jorge Morel

Composed in 1957 for *West Side Story*, Leonard Bernstein's *America* embodies the exuberant dualities of the immigrant experience through its lively alternation between 3/4 and 6/8 meters. The song stages a spirited debate—hope and disillusionment, belonging and otherness—between characters envisioning life in the US. This arrangement preserves the vitality of Bernstein's original while tracing rhythmic echoes to the *Huapango*, the Puerto Rican dance form that inspired its pulse.

2 - Star Spangled Banner

Music by John Stafford Smith, Lyrics by Francis Scott Key, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

Originally a convivial British drinking song, "To Anacreon in Heaven" (1773), by John Stafford

Smith, it became the vehicle for Francis Scott Key's 1814 poem penned during the War of 1812. In this arrangement, chromatic lines and tremolo textures evoke both the anthem's ceremonial gravity and its celebratory virtuosity. The quotation of "Taps" (1862) by General Daniel Butterfield, recalls Jimi Hendrix's 1969 Woodstock rendition during the height of the Vietnam War, offering a subtle homage and reflection on patriotism, protest, and sound.
Arrangement Dedicated to C & C for supporting our common muse. – The Bender Family

3 - Lift Every Voice and Sing

Music by John Rosamond Johnson, Lyrics by James Weldon Johnson, Arr. by Aaron Larget-Caplan

Composed in 1900 by John Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954), the hymn's lyrics were written by his brother, James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938). James was a writer, poet, civil rights activist, and a leader of the NAACP. Here's what James said about how that came to be:

"A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln's birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercises. I wrote the words, and he wrote the music. The song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored school children.

Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved away from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it; they went off to other schools and sang it; they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used."

Arrangement Dedicated to Friend & Poet Charles Coe

4 - Songs for the People

Poem by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Read by Trevor Neal

Written in 1895, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Songs for the People* calls for music and poetry as forces of healing, unity, and peace amid hardship. One of the first African American women to be published in the United States, Harper (1825–1911) was an abolitionist, suffragist, teacher, and writer whose voice championed justice and compassion. In this reading, her words resonate as both lament and aspiration—a timeless invocation for art to lift humanity beyond division and despair.

5 - America the Beautiful

Music by Samuel A. Ward, Lyrics by Katharine Lee Bates, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

Composed by Samuel A. Ward in 1882, and paired in 1895 with Katharine Lee Bates's poem *America*, this hymn merges vision and vista: a meditation on beauty, divinity, and national ideal. The arrangement invites a contemplative unfolding of melody and harmony—simple, radiant, and deeply rooted in American aspiration.

Arrangement Dedicated to Yael Abrahamsson & Ben Weinberg

6 - Battle Hymn of the Republic

Music by William Steffe, Lyrics by Julia Ward Howe, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

Written in 1861 by abolitionist Julia Ward Howe, this hymn transformed the folk melody “John Brown’s Body” into a song of moral conviction and divine justice. The arrangement opens with a percussive snare drum-like effect, evoking the march of history itself. With each reiteration, the hymn evolves—layer by layer—into a reflection on faith, struggle, and renewal.

Arrangement Dedicated to Matthew Denman

7 - The Battle Cry of Freedom

Music and Lyrics by George F. Root, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

Composed in 1862, George F. Root’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* served as both rallying anthem and abolitionist statement. So resonant was its melody and rhythm that it crossed ideological lines, adapted even by the Confederacy with altered words. The arrangement emphasizes the rousing melody while allowing space for its historical inspirations to linger.

Arrangement Dedicated to Patricia Krol

8 - Over There

Music and Lyrics by George M. Cohan, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

George M. Cohan’s 1917 *Over There* became an emblem of American optimism and martial resolve during World War I. Opening with a bugle-like motif, the song announces “The Yanks are coming” with unabashed confidence. This arrangement highlights the march’s rhythmic propulsion and call-to-arms characterized through leaps in register and tremolo texture.

Arrangement Dedicated to Catherine

9 - God Bless America

Music and Lyrics by Irving Berlin, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

Irving Berlin first penned *God Bless America* in 1917 and revised it two decades later amid the shadow of the World War II. A prayer more than a pledge, it carries both gratitude and quiet defiance. Despite its pious tone, the song was reviled by antisemitic groups—an irony not lost on its Russian Jewish immigrant composer.

Arrangement Dedicated to Laurie Caplan

10 - Proud Music of the Storm

Poem by Walt Whitman, Read by Charles Coe

Written in 1869 and later included in *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman’s *Proud Music of the Storm* envisions a vast, dream-like symphony in which the sounds of the natural and human

worlds merge into one transcendent harmony. The poem celebrates music as both earthly and divine—a unifying force that stirs the soul and reflects the boundless vitality of creation itself.

11 - America

Music and Lyrics by Paul Simon, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

Written in 1968, Paul Simon's *America* transforms a youthful road trip into a reflective odyssey of self-discovery. "Let us be lovers, we'll marry our fortunes together," begins a journey through vast American landscapes, quiet revelations, and nods to popular culture and distrust. This waltz, nostalgic yet searching, captures both the intimacy and vastness of a nation perpetually in the act of becoming.

Arrangement Dedicated to Alex Fedorov

12 - Adoration

Florence B. Price, Arr. for Violin and Guitar by Irina Muresanu and Aaron Larget-Caplan

Originally composed and published for organ in 1951, *Adoration* reflects Florence Price's singular blend of lyric grace and spiritual depth. A pioneering African American composer educated at the New England Conservatory, Price's voice lay silent for decades until her manuscripts were rediscovered in 2009. This arrangement for violin and guitar honors both the sacred stillness and the luminous warmth of her harmonic language.

13 - Simple Gifts

Music and Lyrics by Joseph Brackett, Arr. Frederic Hand

Written in 1848 by Shaker elder Joseph Brackett, *Simple Gifts* celebrates humility and joy in motion, "'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free." Best known through Aaron Copland's ballet *Appalachian Spring* (1944), this masterful arrangement by Frederic Hand recalls Copland's pastoral openness and playfulness, while allowing the guitar's resonance to speak in quiet reverence.

14 - Freight (after Elizabeth Cotten)

David Liptak

American folk music has its healthy share of individual stories, and among them is the story of Elizabeth Cotten (1893-1987). As a girl, she taught herself to play the guitar left-handed, holding the instrument upside down and reversed. Married at fifteen, she did not play again until about age sixty, when she, by chance, was working as a housekeeper in the home of Ruth Crawford Seeger. Mike Seeger, folklorist and "old time" country music player, recorded her performing in the 1950's, eventually releasing part of these recordings on Folkways Records. Elizabeth Cotten began to perform again, continuing well into her eighties. My short piece for guitar, *Freight* (2012), is a take on her signature song *Freight Train*, written when she was twelve.

Freight was written for a concert by the Society for New Music in Syracuse and premiered in 2013. (Elizabeth Cotten lived the last part of her life in Syracuse.) – *David Liptak*

15 - Midnight Train

Ian Wiese

Living in the Boston area has taught me a lot of things in life, not the least of which is that sometimes the best way to get into the city is to take the train (which we in the area call the T) rather than drive. Living in Quincy, just a few miles to the south, I normally take the T's Red Line in each day and night. When I head home, I take the train to Braintree.

Sometimes, I end up taking this train around 10 PM, when anyone in their right minds would be home already. Not me, though. In fact, I get lulled into momentary sleep on the train thanks to the persistent and hypnotizing bump of the train's wheels crossing from one rail to another. It ironically acts as a great sleep aide in a place where I definitely should not be sleeping and instead be keeping an eye on my things. After writing a lullaby for Aaron Larget-Caplan's *New Lullaby Project, Seeketh Not Its Own* (2016), I thought constantly on how to write another one, and this moment of inspiration came: the place where I inadvertently sleep might be a great subject for a lullaby. Imagine yourself and a few other lonely workers sitting on a train headed home after a long day. The wheels bounce from one rail to another in a consistent rhythm, one that will over time lull you as it did to me so often. But do keep an eye on your personal belongings, and Thank You for Taking the T. – *Ian Wiese*

16 - Harmony 26 (Judea – William Billings)

18 - Harmony 20 (O Give Thanks – James Lyon)

From Apartment House 1776 by John Cage, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

John Cage's *Apartment House 1776* (1976) reimagines early American hymns and anthems as meditative fragments—"subtractions," as Cage wrote—of the original congregational textures. These *Harmonies*, based on works by Billings and Lyon, reflect the composer's bicentennial homage to American pluralism. During a 2022 residency at the Kirkland Art Center (NY), I arranged nine of these *Harmonies* for solo guitar, guided by Irvine Arditti's string quartet transcriptions. The two presented here reinterpret Cage's luminous austerity through intimate resonance.

Arrangements Dedicated to friends and mentors Gene Caprioglio and Laura Kuhn

17 - Mureau (excerpt)

John Cage, Read by Jeffrey Lependorf

From Cage's *M: Writings '67-'72*, "Mureau"—a fusion of "music" and "Thoreau"—embodies Cage's fascination with the natural world and textual soundscape. Drawing from Thoreau's words on the sounds in nature, it transforms literature into living rhythm. Without fixed instructions by Cage, but based on recordings of him reading the complete 1hr work, each reading becomes an act of listening and imagination, asking the listener to question what is right, words and environment, and the sounds we make and accept.

19 - Mystic Flute, Op. 22

Alan Hovhaness, Arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

A sweet miniature composed for solo piano in 1937, *Mystic Flute* consists of two voices: a simple melody in the harmonic minor scale balanced by an ostinato accompaniment in 7/8 meter that gives the work a hypnotic and ceremonial spirit.

Hovhaness grew up abutting the Mystic River in Arlington, Massachusetts. One can assume a composer so inspired by the natural world, found inspiration along its banks.

20 - 316

Eddie Van Halen, Re-arr. Aaron Larget-Caplan

The work can be traced by to 1986, played as an introduction to *Eruption*, but it received its name 316 with the birth of his son, Wolfgang, on March 16, 1991 (3/16). I learned it when I was 13 years old on electric guitar. I started playing classical at 16 and returned to it when EVH passed away in 2020. I added a few elements to it: harmonic and pizzicato (palm mute) melody. I thought of it as a lullaby and maybe this planted the earliest seeds of what would become the *New Lullaby Project*.

Arrangement Dedicated to my fist guitar teacher, the late Joe Martinez

21 - Bill of Rights, Amended

James Madison, Amended by Aaron Larget-Caplan

This poetic interpretation of the *Bill of Rights* seeks to engage with the foundational language of the United States, invoking both its ideals and the tensions that persist within them. By selectively omitting certain words, the work does not diminish their importance but rather draws attention to their absence, emphasizing the evolving relevance and fragility of these principles. Through this act of poetic reconfiguration, I aim to emphasize areas of historical and contemporary neglect while reflecting upon aspects of the text that resonate with my present concerns.