

Haitian Classical Music

Distinctive Voices and Traditions

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“The rhythm dances, even as the music remembers.”

Why this repertoire matters

My interest in Haitian classical music grew while I was working with a Haitian colleague at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Through that connection, I encountered rare piano scores by Ludovic Lamothe, Solon C. Verret and later recorded Justin Elie’s *Fantaisie tropicale* for piano and orchestra.

Haitian classical piano music remains largely unfamiliar, underperformed, and underrepresented in recital programs, teaching studios, and music history curricula. Access to scores and recordings is often limited, particularly for works by composers such as Solon C. Verret, making it difficult for teachers and performers to discover, study, and program this repertoire.

Yet these works offer substantial artistic and pedagogical value. They introduce students to Haitian dance traditions, syncopated rhythmic language, Romantic lyricism, coloristic piano writing, and culturally distinctive approaches to musical expression. They also expand the standard teaching repertoire by inviting students to engage with music beyond the familiar European canon.

Making this repertoire more visible can support more inclusive programming while providing practical material for developing rhythmic precision, voicing, articulation, tonal color, stylistic awareness, and expressive interpretation.

This handout introduces three Haitian composers - Ludovic Lamothe, Justin Elie, and Solon C. Verret - through three central ideas:

RHYTHMIC RICHNESS

Syncopation, dance impulse, repetition, and rhythmic independence

CULTURAL DEPTH

Haitian identity, memory, longing, resilience, and the méringue tradition

PEDAGOGICAL VALUE

Voicing, color, phrasing, stylistic flexibility, and inclusive programming

A distinctive musical language

- African-derived rhythmic traditions: syncopation, bodily motion, layered pulse, and dance gesture.
- French and European musical forms: Romantic lyricism, chromatic harmony, salon idioms, and virtuoso concert writing.
- Haitian dance and cultural memory: méringue, carnival references, folk practices, identity, and resilience.

Haitian music is vibrant because it can hold energy, lyricism, nostalgia, and memory at the same time.

Méringue: a dance that remembers

Méringue is a Haitian dance and musical genre shaped by the blending of European social dance and African-derived rhythm. Haitian composers transformed it into a refined piano genre for salon, recital, and concert settings.

THE DANCE	BENEATH THE DANCE
Pulse, syncopation, repetition, physical motion, carnival energy	Nostalgia, longing, memory, restlessness, bittersweet lyricism

“The rhythm moves forward, while the emotion looks backward.”

Three composers, three distinctive voices

Composer	Primary lens	Selected works	Teaching focus
Ludovic Lamothe	Rhythm, carnival, dance identity	Nibo; Danse capoise; Habanera, Danza No. 1; Sobo; Scherzo	Syncopation, articulation, pulse, character
Solon C. Verret	Nostalgia, lyricism, bittersweet méringue	Nostalgie, Méringue; Rêve impossible; Mélodie in E-flat; Fascination; Marche nuptiale; <i>La cathédrale illuminée</i>	Voicing, rubato, color, dance + longing
Justin Elie	Virtuosic synthesis on a concerto scale	Fantaisie tropicale for piano and orchestra	Orchestral color, dramatic pacing, virtuosity

Listening lens: celebration and sorrow

Haitian piano music is often colorful, vibrant, and rhythmically compelling. Its rhythms, however, do not always express uncomplicated joy. Dance may coexist with nostalgia, cultural memory, emotional tension, or an undercurrent of sorrow.

Historical context matters, but interpretive caution matters too. Haiti’s history was shaped by slavery, revolution, foreign domination, and continuing efforts to preserve cultural identity. This does not mean that every minor harmony directly represents historical trauma. Rather, the repertoire emerged within those histories, and rhythm can function as more than entertainment - as a vehicle for identity, memory, and resilience.

Selected piano repertoire and pedagogical pathways

Levels are intentionally broad and should be confirmed from the complete score and the individual student's technical and musical background.

Composer	Work	Suggested level	Pedagogical possibilities	Access / listening
Lamothe	Nibo, Méringue de Carnaval	Intermediate-Advanced	Syncopation, carnival pulse, rhythmic projection	Solo recording difficult to locate; arrangements may be available
Lamothe	Scènes de Carnaval, No. 4: Danse capoise	Intermediate-Advanced	Dance gesture, articulation, repetition, character	Check public catalogs and archival sources
Lamothe	Danses Espagnoles	Intermediate-Advanced	Stylistic flexibility, Dance rhythm and controlled pedaling	Check public catalogs and archival sources
Lamothe	Habanera, Danza No. 1 in F minor	Intermediate-Advanced	Caribbean dance rhythm, balance, phrasing	Check public catalogs and archival sources
Lamothe	Scherzo / Sobo	Intermediate	Agility, rhythmic clarity, concert character	Availability varies
Lamothe	Sobo	Late intermediate-Advanced	Rhythmic drive, crisp articulation, layered accents	Availability varies
Verret	Nostalgie, Méringue	Intermediate-Advanced	Dance + longing, voicing, tonal color, phrase direction	Limited access; contact presenter for information
Verret	Rêve impossible, Nocturne No. 3	Early to late Intermediate	Cantabile, rubato, chromatic harmony, atmosphere	Limited access; contact presenter for information
Verret	Mélodie en mi bémol majeur	Intermediate	Singing line, balance, expressive timing	Limited access; contact presenter for information
Verret	Fascination, Méringue haïtienne	Intermediate-Advanced	Méringue pulse, salon style, rhythmic elegance	Limited access; contact presenter for information
Verret	<i>La cathédrale illuminée</i>	Intermediate-Advanced	Color, sonority, atmosphere, and narrative character	Limited access; contact presenter for information
Verret	Marche Nuptiale	Intermediate-Advanced	Steady March rhythm, chordal balance, large-scale phrasing	Limited access; contact presenter for information
Elie	Fantaisie tropicale	Advanced / professional	Virtuosity, orchestral color, large-scale pacing	Presenter's recording available

Studio and recital applications

RHYTHM	SOUND	PROGRAMMING
Teach syncopation, layered pulse, and independence without separating technique from character.	Develop voicing, color, pedaling, lyrical phrasing, and the balance between motion and repose.	Pair Haitian works with Chopin, Debussy, Gottschalk, or Caribbean and African-diasporic repertoire while preserving each work's distinct identity.

These works offer more than rhythmic training: they ask performers to hold vitality and melancholy within the same phrase.

Listening, and score access

DIGITAL RESOURCE PAGE

Contents:

- Presenter's Fantaisie tropicale recording
- Approved Lamothe listening links
- Any authorized Verret excerpt
- Downloadable repertoire guide
- Presenter contact information

QR CODE



Important access note for Solon C. Verret

Verret's scores and piano recordings remain difficult to access. The edition of *Nostalgie, Méringue* used in this presentation was edited by Jean R. Perrault and is copyrighted. The score itself should not be posted or distributed without permission.

For information about score access and future availability, please contact the presenter (Lina.lee@wright.edu)

Selected references and resources

Largey, Michael. *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Largey, Michael. "Music and Resistance." *Island Luminous*, Florida International University.

Perrault, Jean R., ed. Solon C. Verret, *Nostalgie, Méringue*. Copyright 2012. Used only with appropriate permission.

University and archival catalogs for works by Ludovic Lamothe and Justin Elie.

Presenter's recording of Justin Elie's *Fantaisie tropicale*: Élie, Justin. *Fantaisie tropicale for Piano and Orchestra*. Lina Yoo Min Lee, piano; Duluth Chamber Orchestra. Live recording.

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Contact the presenter for resource links and information about Verret score access.

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