

Michael Daugherty (b. 1954)

*Van Vechten Variations* for solo piano (2025)

Inspired by the photographs of Carl Van Vechten

*Van Vechten Variations* for solo piano (2025) was commissioned by the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation. The first performance was given by Jack Gao, piano, at Carnegie Hall on September 29, 2025.

The composer writes:

My composition is inspired by the photographs of Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964), who created striking portraits of influential artists and performers of the early twentieth century.

As a youth in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, I spent my summers playing Little League baseball at a park named after the Van Vechten family. Its most prominent member was Carl Van Vechten, born and raised in Cedar Rapids, where his father was a successful banker and his musical mother established the city's first public library. After graduating from Washington High School, which I also attended, Van Vechten moved to Chicago to begin his career as a distinguished man of letters.

In 1906, he relocated to New York City, where he became immersed in avant-garde movements in music, dance and the fine arts, and secured a position as music critic at *The New York Times*. On assignment in Paris in the summer of 1913, he enthusiastically reviewed the world premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and met Gertrude Stein, later becoming her literary executor. Through his innovative essays, novels, and reviews, Van Vechten brought international attention to writers, singers, musicians, actors, dancers, and artists, many of whom were associated with the Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937).

Today Van Vechten is primarily known for his unique photographs of artists he befriended during his years in New York City. Taken in his home studio using a portable 35mm Leica camera, these portraits remained in his private collection until his death. In 1966 the Library of Congress acquired 1,400 of the photographs, which are now part of the Van Vechten Collection.

My composition for piano is in 11 movements, each focusing on a personality photographed by Van Vechten, creating my own musical variations on their portraits.

1. Carl Van Vechten (1934)

American writer, photographer, and performing arts critic who wrote in 1917 that ragtime and jazz were the only uniquely American music, at a time when these were dismissed or ignored by other critics.

2. Langston Hughes (1939)

American poet, social activist, and playwright known as the leader of the Harlem Renaissance. Van Vechten contributed to the editing, publication, and promotion of his work.

3. Marian Anderson (1940)

American contralto and the first African American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera. Remembered for singing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" during her 1939 concert, nationally broadcast by NBC Radio, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, after being denied a performance at Washington, D.C.'s Constitution Hall.

4. Salvador Dalí (1940)

Spanish surrealist artist notorious for his trademark mustache and the dreamlike imagery of his paintings, as well as his outrageous publicity stunts.

5. Frida Kahlo (1932)

Mexican artist known for her symbolic self-portraits depicting her Mexican heritage and her enduring physical and emotional pain.

6. Paul Robeson (1944)

American bass-baritone, actor, concert artist of international renown, and a prominent civil rights activist, ostracized by the American entertainment industry after the U.S. State Department revoked his passport in 1950 for his political views.

7. Gertrude Stein (1935)

American modernist writer and influential figure in the Parisian avant-garde scene from 1903 until her death in 1946, known for her repetitive style of writing ("A rose is a rose is a rose"). Van Vechten served as her literary agent and executor.

8. Dizzy Gillespie (1955)

American virtuoso jazz trumpeter, composer, and band leader, prominent in the bebop movement of the 1940s, and introducing Afro-Cuban rhythms into jazz.

9. Martha Graham (1961)

American dancer, choreographer, and pioneer of modern dance.

10. Anna May Wong (1932)

Chinese American film actress who achieved international success through a career in Hollywood silent and motion pictures, and was outspoken against stereotypes and typecasting of Asians in the film industry.

11. Carl Van Vechten (1933)

A final tip of the hat to Mr. Van Vechten.