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Musicians Launch “America the Dream”

*A new version of a beloved patriotic song encourages communities
to lift their voices and take a fresh look at the American dream.*

HANCOCK, NH - As the nation moves forward from a divisive election, protests, and a relentless pandemic, a musical ray of hope and healing is emerging from an unlikely collaboration. New Hampshire folk singer Steve Schuch has teamed up with composer and virtual choir producer Shelbie Ressler, a graduate student at The Juilliard School. Their humble goal: bringing Americans together with an inclusive new version of “America the Beautiful.”

“I wanted to create a reimagined version of this beloved song that reflects the dreams we hold in common,” says singer/songwriter Schuch. “Beyond the song itself, a critical piece was creating a new web site with free tools to encourage constructive conversations about what this dream of America means for each of us.”

Schuch was inspired to create the updated anthem, called “America the Dream,” while planning a celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Day in his hometown of Hancock, NH. He imagined a familiar song everyone could sing together, honoring both the dreams we have achieved and the ones we still hope to attain. It would weave “America the Beautiful” with Dr. King’s dream for all America. Could singing help bring a fractured nation back together? It was worth a try.

Schuch remembers the uplifting sound that day of children’s voices, together with parents and grandparents. “We sang it again a few weeks later. Both times, people kept asking me, ‘Why isn’t this being sung everywhere?’ And a light bulb went off,” says Schuch.

The project began with the simple idea of making free sheet music available all across America. It could be used in elementary classrooms and community, school and church choirs – anywhere people wanted to sing. The arrangements run from basic lead sheet (melody, lyrics and chords), to versions for adult and children’s chorus, a cappella scores for full choir, and even a symphonic version. Several more are in the pipeline, including a “Nashville” version.

For Music Videos, free downloadable Sheet Music and other resources, visit AmericaTheDream.org.



Bringing the Music to Life

Early on, it became apparent that music videos of the song performances were needed to communicate its potential. But how could these be created in a time of COVID-19, when choirs weren't able to sing together? Schuch came across a virtual choir YouTube video of "What the World Needs Now," produced by graduating senior Shelbie Rassler and fellow students at the Berklee College of Music. The video had gone viral and been seen by nearly two million people.



"America The Dream" | Shelbie Rassler Orchestral Arrangement

"I was charmed by Shelbie's arrangement and the students' great energy," Schuch recalls.

"I contacted her about the "America the Dream" project and asked if she might consider orchestrating a music video. Luckily for me, she said yes!" Schuch and Rassler found they shared a passion not only for music, but for the ways music can create community and bring people together. Throughout the summer and fall of 2020, they worked together on a symphonic version of the piece, along with two simpler versions.

"When we heard about this project, we were eager to jump on board, as we felt the message is crucial, especially in our current political and social climate," says Rassler. She and sound mix engineer Daniel Santiago, another Berklee musician, loved the idea that people could not only listen, but actively participate through singing and discussion. "This reimagining of 'America the Dream,' with new lyrics describing the need to fix the inequities in our nation to create a more just, inclusive society, is exactly the message we must spread as far and wide as possible during this turning point in American history."

Rassler tapped the talent of Berklee College student musicians to create videos of the new song. Pandemic restrictions made this a challenging process. "Creating 'virtual choir' videos is a labor of love and requires an incredibly large amount of time and energy," says Rassler. Working remotely, the musicians had only audio cues and a reference piano track to listen to as they recorded their parts on cell phones and laptops. Each individual part and phrase then had to be mixed back into the whole piece. Virtual challenges aside, the videos created by these earnest young musicians aptly demonstrate the power and purpose of "America the Dream." Just as the musicians had to work remotely, Schuch and Rassler have yet to meet in person. Rassler is now studying composition in the graduate program at The Juilliard School in New York City. Schuch has stayed close to home in rural New Hampshire since the pandemic shut things down, doing more writing than performing.

Schuch considers his work on "America the Dream" a prayer for a divided nation. He imagines Americans connecting through this special music, rediscovering the promise of Dr. King's lofty vision of a united country, committed to offering hope for all. Young and old, black and white and brown. Jubilant voices rising from schools, prisons and houses of worship. Everywhere, from "sea to shining sea."

To hear "America the Dream" performed and download the free sheet music, visit AmericaTheDream.org.

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On Crafting a New American Anthem

Many people have heard the story of how Katherine Lee Bates wrote “America the Beautiful” in 1892. It was a poem inspired by the view from the summit of Pike’s Peak in Colorado. At the time, Bates had no idea the lines of poetry she was jotting down in her journal would ever become a song at all. In an early draft, simply called “America,” the first stanza lauds “halcyon skies” and ends lyrically, “Till souls wax fair as earth and air / And music-hearted sea!”

Over the years, Katherine Lee Bates continued to revise the words. “America” was published and sung to many different melodies, including “Auld Lang Syne.” But the one that proved most popular was a hymn melody composed by church organist Samuel A. Ward, still sung today.



“America The Dream” | Arrangement IV

Although the song has changed over the years, revising the words for “America the Beautiful” to reflect modern times was a delicate task. “Finding just the right language is hard, especially with an anthem as beloved as ‘America the Beautiful,’” says Schuch. “People are attached to the version they first learned as a child. Any revisions need to be done respectfully, with an ear to the balance in tone between the old and the new.”

Schuch finds it remarkable that such a popular piece of music never had a chorus – those memorable, repeated lines that echo the title of a song. That might explain why the first verse and refrain of the traditional song are often repeated, leaving out the later verses entirely. Schuch and co-writer Michael Bradley of Hillsborough, NH, put special emphasis on creating a unifying chorus for “America the Dream.” To do this, they sought input from other songwriters, poets, schoolteachers and choir directors across the country. They eventually settled on language that would have been familiar to both Katharine Lee Bates and Dr. King: “America! America! God grant that we may see / True brotherhood and sisterhood from sea to shining sea.”



Artwork by Kim Cunningham of Hancock, NH

To see the Music Videos, Lyrics and Sheet Music, and learn more about the history of this iconic song, visit AmericaTheDream.org.

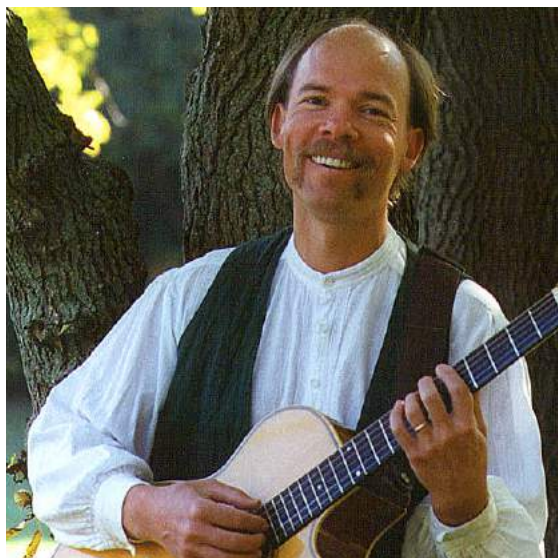
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Musicians of “America The Dream”



STEVE SCHUCH has delighted audiences of all ages across the U.S. and Europe. Classically trained on violin, he is an award-winning composer, singer/songwriter, author and storyteller. Credits include a Grammy nomination, PBS soundtracks and a Parents' Choice Gold Award for his children's recording, *Trees of Life*. Schuch's musical story, *A Symphony of Whales*, received five national book awards and was featured on National Public Radio's "Performance Today." A former Audubon naturalist and Peace Corps Volunteer, Schuch lives with his wife and various creatures in the wilds of New Hampshire.



SHELBIE RASSLER is a composer, arranger, conductor and multi-instrumentalist pursuing a Masters of Music in Composition at The Juilliard School. Honored as the Boston Conservatory at Berklee's 2019-2020 Presser Scholar, Rassler produced, arranged, and edited a viral cover of Burt Bacharach/Hal David's "What the World Needs Now," featured on "The Today Show" and "Good Morning America." She served as the Music/Technical Adviser for PBS WNED's "Band Against Bullying" production. Her original song "Rebuild" was performed by hundreds of artists around the world to raise money for the NAACP and Americans for the Arts. An orchestral arrangement by Rassler premiered at the United Nations 75th Anniversary Celebration.

