ARTIST
Vienna Teng, piano and vocals

PROGRAM
Tonight’s program will be announced from the stage.

At 6:30 pm, the indie female duo Dagmar will perform an opening-act set in the Gunn Atrium.

PROGRAM SUBJECT TO CHANGE. Please be considerate of others and turn off all phones, pagers, and watch alarms, and unwrap all lozenges prior to the performance. Photography and recording of any kind are not permitted. Thank you.
“So come out. You have been waiting long enough.”

This clarion call opens Aims, Vienna Teng’s fifth studio album. It’s as much a reminder for Ms. Teng herself as an invitation to her listeners—a call to awaken one’s full potential.

The singer-songwriter lives by her own words. A computer science major at Stanford, she worked briefly at Cisco Systems in Silicon Valley before signing a record deal. She spent the next seven years as a full-time musician, releasing four acclaimed albums and touring both stateside and abroad. Her song craft has gathered accolades from the likes of National Public Radio, David Letterman, and Entertainment Weekly. But in 2010, she shifted gears yet again, this time in pursuit of decidedly nonmusical interests: a graduate program in sustainability at the University of Michigan. “I like to joke that I have long-term ADD,” she says of her unorthodox career moves. “But going back to school made total sense to me. It was time.”

Now graduated with an M.B.A. and an M.S. in environmental science, she brings new intention and ambition to her song craft—as well as a newfound lightness. “I want to write songs that feel aware of the wider world,” she explains, “songs that speak to you on a personal level and on a grander scale at the same time. The issues we grapple with as a society are just variations on what happens inside a family or between lovers. I want to shine a light on that connection.” Not an easy task, but Ms. Teng found it a joyful endeavor. “I got to fall in love with music again,” she says. “Being a musician no longer defines my whole identity; I’m doing other work, too. So I’m not pinning so many expectations on these little songs. I don’t need them to be ‘successful’ in ways that are beyond my control. I can just have fun.”

Indeed, the new album finds Ms. Teng in full adventurous mode. Recorded in Nashville with producer Cason Cooley (Katie Herzig, Matthew Perryman Jones), Aims is exuberant and buoyant in its enthusiasm yet crafted with the same creative precision that has defined her previous work. The acoustic piano, once the centerpiece of her recordings, plays an occasional supportive role here; in its place are intricate layers of electronica, percussion, strings, and electric guitars. “Cason and I built a playlist of reference songs when we started working,” Ms. Teng remembers. “We put Beck, and Florence and the Machine, and Kanye West on there, James Blake, Foster the People, Vampire Weekend. We started by stealing from the music we were obsessed with.”

The result is glorious, intelligent pop music with a signature all its own. Against a backdrop of stomping percussion and a gospel-inspired refrain, “In the 99” rejects the black-and-white, us-versus-them conflict view of the Occupy movement, instead exploring inequality through the eyes of a compassionate investment banker. In the gorgeous and disturbing “The Hymn of Axiom,” Ms. Teng sings from the perspective of “big data,” densely layering and manipulating her vocals into an electronically textured choir to spin an eerily relevant cautionary tale. There are tender moments as well, as in the folk-tinged album closer “Goodnight New York,” a love letter to a previous home, relationship, and perhaps vocation. “I’ll say goodnight, but it’s never goodbye,” she promises. If Aims is any indication, there’s even finer music to come from this artist in the years ahead.

—Notes by Daniel Hoffman