

Wednesdays @ 7 presents

This Island

Susan Narucki, soprano and Donald Berman, piano

Wednesday, March 2, 2022 - 7:00 p.m.
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

From “Les Heures Claires, Les Heures d’Après Midi, Les Heures du Soir” op. 50 (1918)

Irène Fuerison

O la splendeur de notre joie
Dis moi, ma simple et ma tranquille amie
Ardeur des sens, ardeur des coeurs
Vous m’avez dit tel soir

Three Songs (1922-23)

Elizabeth Claisse

“Issue”

Complainte

“Philosophie”

From “Les Heures Claires” (1908)

Nadia Boulanger and Raoul Pugno

Le ciel en nuit s’est déplié
Que tes yeux clairs, tes yeux d’été
Ta bonté

Intermission

Three Songs (1947)

Henriette Bosmans

Dit eiland

In den Regen

Teken den hemel in het zand der zee

Four Poems, Op. 16 (1924)

Marion Bauer

Through the upland meadows
I love the night
Midsummer dreams
In the bosom of the desert

Program Notes:

“...If you could only be here with me so I could share with you the happiness of these great poems, they would let you realize what we all now need more urgently: that transience is not separation...”

-Rainer Maria Rilke to Adelheid Franziska von der Marwitz, January 14, 1919 (*from The Dark Interval, translated and edited by Ulrich Baer*)

A single reference contained in a book of Rilke's letters was the catalyst for this evening's program of little-known songs for voice and piano written during the first half of the twentieth century. Some of the pieces were composed during a period of immense social upheaval and most of the composers happen to be women. I will admit that the project was not something I planned to do; over a year ago, I turned to Rilke's beautiful letters written to friends and colleagues struggling with grief in an attempt to make sense of the past two difficult years. There were many passages that sustained me, but the words “transience is not separation” was a ray of sunlight in a dark room, and brought me back to something I have loved to do for almost forty years; pouring over the fusion of poetry and music in unusual corners of the repertoire.

Through following the trail of Rilke's reference to the Symbolist poet Emile Verhaeren, I discovered settings of the Belgian poet's epic cycle of love poems *Les Heures Claires*, *Les Heures d'Après-midi* and *Les Heures du Soir*, in songs written by Nadia Boulanger and Raoul Pugno, and Belgian composer Irène Fuerison. Further following a connection between Boulanger and Marion Bauer, I uncovered Bauer's early song cycle, *Four Poems, Op. 16*, (1924), written shortly after her return from France. In addition, I revisited the works of Dutch composer Henriette Bosmans and took a turn in the road, discovering songs by the unknown French composer Elizabeth Claisse. It gives me great pleasure to share these works with you tonight.

Belgian **Irène Fuerison** (1875-1931) was trained as a pianist and began composing in the year 1908. Her catalog of works focuses chiefly on works for voice and on chamber music. Fuerison was steeped in the developments in music in Northern Europe during the first two decades of the 20th century; although her work met with admiration, she modestly referred to herself as an amateur. Her marriage to a wealthy attorney provided her with the resources and opportunities which were not readily offered to women composers in the early decades of the 20th century; including supporting performances of her works - alongside the works of other composers - in concerts whose proceeds benefited widows, children, and wounded veterans of World War I. Fuerison established a philanthropic foundation to support young Belgian composers; the annual prize continues to be awarded, over ninety years after her death.

Fuerison is represented on this evening's concert by four works from her song cycle, “*Les Heures Claires, Les Heures d'Après Midi, Les Heures du Soir*”, op. 50, completed in 1918. In constructing the cycle, Fuerison has chosen from among the dozens of poems in Verhaeren's work, to create a storyline focusing on the unfolding miracle of long enduring love. The songs alternate between lush piano accompaniment with an expansive vocal line and a more intimate, recitative-like delivery of the texts. The songs have a natural, organic flow within a balanced formal structure; the composer seems adept at creating a framework that captures the essence of Verhaeren's transcendent poems in a manner that is unforced and luminous.

In my search for more settings of Verhaeren's poems, I came across the composer **Elizabeth Claisse**, about whom little is known. The songs on this program were written during 1922 and 1923, published by B. Roudanez, a prominent music publisher located in Paris and dedicated to a well-known mezzo soprano active at that time. But of Claisse's biography, her other works, any performance of the songs, there is no trace.

The three songs presented in this evening's program are distinctive and well-written, and continue to intrigue me. "Issue" with text by Yves Arnaud (a poet who also is unknown) describes the search for a loved one, lost at the forest's edge. *Complainte*, with text by Ronsard, is another journey toward the beloved, winding through a springtime world of plants and birdsong. Finally, "Philosophie" describes the ill-timed meeting of a flock of birds and ice-covered branches of a blossoming peach tree, and an unexpected joyous outcome.

Claisse's compositional voice reflects in the musical life of France of the 1920's. She illuminates the texts in a straightforward, simple way. The songs' spare, open textures, and repeated rhythmic motifs indicate Claisse's awareness of the composers of Les Six.

Nadia Boulanger's remarkable life most often focuses on her importance as a teacher of composition, and as an advocate for the work of her sister, the composer Lili Boulanger. However, Nadia's compositions, now being rediscovered, give an insight into another facet of her singular talent. The three songs on this evening's program are taken from the seven-movement song cycle *Les Heures Claires*, written in 1908, in collaboration with Raoul Pugno, Boulanger's teacher at the Paris Conservatory. The songs include a high degree of chromaticism, but never stray far from a discernible tonality. The vocal line preferences the speech-rhythms of the French language, as in the style of the mid to late songs of Claude Debussy.

Dutch composer **Henriette Bosmans** (1895-1952) was a prolific composer of instrumental and vocal works, and who began to gain national and international recognition before the outbreak of the Second World War. Bosmans was also a celebrated pianist whose frequent appearances as a soloist with Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra brought her to prominence. However, the changing conditions for cultural life in Holland under the Nazi regime, coupled with Bosmans' half-Jewish heritage, curtailed her professional opportunities, limiting her performances to underground "house concerts," often at great personal risk. Personal difficulties plagued her as well; after the death of her fiancé in 1935, she found herself unable to compose for over a decade.

In 1947, Bosmans began to compose again. A close collaboration with the mezzo soprano Noémie Perugia enabled her to write at least twenty-five works for voice over the period of the next few years, the best known of which are a dozen songs by the French Symbolist poet Paul Fort.

Bosmans also found inspiration in the works of Dutch Symbolist poets Adriaan Roland Holst and JWF Werumeus Buning and three of these songs are presented on this evening's program. The songs provide an insight into Bosmans' mature compositional voice, with a sweeping sense of lyricism and intensity of emotional expression, coupled with a piano accompaniment of wide variety, which at times, is orchestral in nature.

Both *In den Regen* and *Dit Eiland* speak to Roland Holst's search for connection in an increasingly alienated world. In the former, Bosmans' sets a 9/8 irregular accompaniment against the singers' straightforward 4/4, creating a sense of instability and the musical idea of a wash of endless misting rain, through which the protagonist searches for herself. In *Dit Eiland*, a piano introduction replete with motion and dynamic contrasts offsets the questions the singer poses:

*How did we land here,
What for... from where...?
Does, somewhere at this beach,
that strange ship still lie,
ready to leave?*

After the turbulence and disquiet of the questions, the song ends with the only solution that seems possible to the poet, and we can assume, to Bosmans herself

*Be calm, shut the door.
Love one another.*

Similarly, in the final song of the set, *Teken den hemel in het zand der zee*, Bosmans creates a spacious landscape for voice and piano, mirroring the endless expanse of time and space in Werumeus Buning's poem.

In conversation with my longtime friend Dick Bruinsma about the work, he speculated that the poet may have been referring to the final words of Ariel in Shakespeare's "The Tempest"

*"The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherits, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.*

Marion Bauer (1882-1955) was a composer, educator, and advocate for the emerging and vital contemporary music scene of 20th century America. Her pursuit of an education in music brought her from her home state of Washington to New York City and, on several occasions, to Paris, where she studied with Raoul Pugno and Nadia Boulanger, among others. Despite occasional forays into serialism and a high degree of dissonance associated with modernism, Bauer's music, overall, is conservative.

However, within that sound world, there is a wealth of detail to explore, as in the *Four Songs, Op. 16*. Written in 1924 the songs were Bauer's first foray into the genre of the extended art song, as opposed to her lighter "parlor" songs written in the preceding decade. The songs are extremely well-crafted; with a colorful harmonic palette no doubt influenced by her studies in France, virtuosic piano writing, and beautifully constructed vocal lines of immense variety.

The texts by Imagist poet John Gould Fletcher are taken from his *Colour Symphonies*. Fletcher and the Imagists sought to musicalize their texts, prioritizing rhythm, and repetition; they focused on ordinary experiences captured through the senses. While the four songs are firmly rooted in the musical language of their time and place, a closer look at their formal structure tells us that Bauer was clearly cognizant of the underlying concerns of the Imagists. The two interior songs rely on repeated rhythmic motifs, which the composer embellishes and varies; they illuminate and elevate everyday experiences - observing the changes in the light at separate times of day, looking at the sky and the lake from within a gently rocking boat. By contrast, the first and last songs describe the monumental landscape of the vast, open West, with virtuosic piano writing and vocal writing of immense sweep and scope. Bauer's compositional voice is confident, true and of its time.

During a time when everything stopped and losses abounded, I found something unexpected - kinship with voices from the past and music that, to me, reaffirmed the possibilities of life, fully lived.

- Susan Narucki

Artist Bios:



Susan Narucki, soprano

For over three decades, American soprano **Susan Narucki** has forged a unique path; her dedication to the music of our time has led to award winning recordings, critically acclaimed performances with musicians of the first rank and close collaborations with generations of composers. For over a decade, she has been deeply engaged in commissioning, producing, and performing chamber operas that illuminate critical issues in society. Her projects have earned major philanthropic support from the MAP Fund/Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, UC MEXUS, Creative Capital Foundation, New Music USA and multiple awards from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Ms. Narucki commissioned and produced *Inheritance*, a chamber opera written by Grammy Award winning composer Lei Liang, addressing gun violence in America. Co-presented by ARTPower and the Department of Music at UC San Diego, *Inheritance* had its premiere performances in October, 2018. Ms. Narucki also commissioned and produced *Cuatro Corridos* (2013), the critically acclaimed chamber opera that addresses trafficking of women across the U.S.- Mexico border. The opera was performed throughout the United States and Mexico and has had multiple broadcasts on Canal 22, Mexico's cultural television network. *Cuatro Corridos* was recorded for Bridge Records and earned a 2017 Latin Grammy Nomination and was a Critic's Choice of both Opera News and *Gramophone*.

Susan Narucki and Donald Berman have been collaborating on performance and recording projects since 1992, with appearances at Weill Recital Hall, Tufts University, the Monadnock Music Festival, and the American Academy of Rome. Ms. Narucki and Mr. Berman are recipients of the Samuel Sanders Collaborative Award from the Classical Recording Foundation. Their recordings include Song Cycles of Aaron Jay Kernis (Koch), Music from Composers of the American Academy of Rome (Bridge), The Light that is Felt: Songs of Charles Ives (New World) and most recently, the Grammy nominated The Edge of Silence: Vocal Chamber Music of György Kurtág (AVIE Records).

Ms. Narucki is a Distinguished Professor of Music at UC San Diego.



Donald Berman, piano

Pianist **Donald Berman** is recognized as a chief exponent of new works by living composers, overlooked music by 20th century masters, and recitals that link classical and modern repertoires. His 2-volume *The Unknown Ives* and *The Uncovered Ruggles* (New World) represents the only recordings of the complete short piano works of Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles extant. Other recordings on Bridge Records include the 4-CD set *Americans in Rome: Music by Fellows of the American Academy in Rome*, *The Piano Music of Martin Boykan*, and *Scott Wheeler: Tributes and Portraits*. Berman has also recorded *The Light That Is Felt: Songs of Charles Ives* (with Susan Narucki, soprano New World), *Wasting the Night: Songs of Scott Wheeler* (Naxos) and *Christopher Theofanidis's Piano Concerto* (Summitt), as well as music by Su Lian Tan (Arsis), Arthur Levering (New World), Martin Boykan (New World; Bridge), Tamar Diesendruck (Centaur), and Aaron Jay Kernis (Koch).

Recent performances by Donald Berman include solo recitals at Bargemusic, National Sawdust, and (le)Poisson Rouge in New York City. He has also been a featured soloist at Zankel Hall, Rockport Music Festival as well as abroad in Belgrade, Rome, Beijing, and Israel. A 2011 Radcliffe Institute Fellow, Berman is currently President of The Charles Ives Society. He teaches at the Longy School of Music of Bard College and Tufts University. His principal teachers were Mildred Victor, George Barth, John Kirkpatrick, and Leonard Shure.

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