



Grace Notes

Newsletter of New Amsterdam Singers

May 2010

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Join us for
**Morning,
Evening, Earth
and Sky**

Thursday
June 3, 8pm
one night only

The Church of the
Holy Trinity
316 East 88th Street
(btwn 1st and 2nd
Avenues)

Purchase tickets
now:
www.nasingers.org

Featuring the **New York City premiere** of Ronald Perera's *Earthsongs* for mixed voices and music by Johannes Brahms, Robert Baksa, Carlos Chavez, Robert Dennis, Kirke Mechem, Josef Rheinberger



NAS Greets Morning, Evening, Earth, and Sky

by Ray Scheindlin

Our June concert begins with a tribute to morning: Robert Baksa's melodic "Morning Greeting"; and a salute to evening: Joseph Rheinberger's romantic "Abendlied." The program includes sets of choral nocturnes by Johannes Brahms and Carlos Chávez and a set of aubades by Robert Dennis. These pieces on the diurnal cycle provide a lush background to two multi-movement pieces on varied themes, both by living composers whose work NAS has long championed: Kirke Mechem and Ronald Perera.

Kirke Mechem's *Suite for Chorus* started out as an experiment in avoiding what the composer calls "the text trap." Originally subtitled *Songs without Words*, it used wordless vowels and consonants and treated the singers as musical instruments. In its final version, the original text has been replaced by four ordinary song texts, "using consonants and vowels for articulation and tone in the same way as a string orchestra uses different bowing strokes and pizzicato." The four texts are the familiar "Kumbaya," set to an original melody; the folk song "Too Young to Marry"; "They That Mourn," a passage from the New Testament; and "Papageno and the Prince," a comical riff on Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. This performance, by our chamber chorus, marks the New York premiere.

Ronald Perera's *Earthsongs* is a setting of six poems by e.e. cummings, a poet who put earth and nature at the center of his work. The piece was originally designed for orchestra and women's chorus and was recorded by our women's chorus with piano accompaniment. In our June concert, we will be giving the New York premiere of a revised version for mixed chorus and piano. As the composer describes the piece, "The musical settings are predominantly lighthearted, with diatonic, modal melodic writing, triadic harmonies

Call Lauren Scott at
212-568-5948 for more
details

NAS Products

NAS now has a whole line of products, including T-shirts and sweatshirts with the new NAS logo; CDs; and our very own cookbook.

Clothing: We have t-shirts, sweatshirts, and hooded sweatshirts in various colors and sizes, all bearing our new log. T-shirts and cost \$15; sweatshirts cost \$20; hooded sweatshirts cost \$25. They can be ordered at rehearsals or by sending Nate a message at mickelsonjn@yahoo.com.

Cookbook: The cost NAS's own cookbook, *Cooking for Crowds*, is \$59 for the hardcover, \$39 for softcover (+ plus \$7.25 for shipping and handling). The cookbook is available through our website (nasingers.org). Dennis Goodenough, one of the cookbook's three editors, described it in our last newsletter as follows: "There are three main things that make this book special. First, it's a celebration of NAS, its accomplishments, and its loyal army of volunteers, with pictures and anecdotes throughout. Second, it's a cookbook of theme-based menus in which each recipe contributes to a common culinary objective. Finally, it's about cooking for a

and easily perceived meters, but they contain frequent twists and ambiguities that serve to make melody and harmony as elusive as some of the poet's imagery." Perhaps, too, the twists and turns of the music are intended as a musical correlative to the peculiarities of e.e. cummings's poetic style, with its idiosyncratic capitalization and lineation, its unconventional treatment of word boundaries, and its constant verbal surprises. The six pieces are a comfortable mix of the lyrical, the vigorous, and the bouncily syncopated.

Featured Volunteer: Hannah Kerwin, Alto and So Much More

an interview by Jane
Barry

Jane: Hannah, I have known you for a few years now as an alto in NAS, but I don't know anything about your life outside of NAS. Could you tell us about yourself?

Hannah: My New Jersey roots run deep into the ground, as we were farmers from the seventeenth century until the early twentieth century. My uncle, a church musician, teacher, and choral composer, recommended sending me to the New School for Music in Princeton for my first piano and theory lessons. Curiously, we were taught to count beats by individual note values rather than by the beats in a measure. (Thus, in a four-beat measure consisting of a half note, a quarter rest and two eighth notes, we counted "1-2-1-1-and" rather than "1-2-3-4-and.") Though I learned the traditional way later, I revert on occasion to counting the successive note values in early music or multi-metered contemporary music.

Like a few other long-term NAS members, I joined the chorus at the beginning of my career, when I lived closer to our rehearsal space. Now I commute from Chatham, New Jersey. My twin sons, Perry and Bennett, are in fifth grade and would spend every waking moment playing computer games if they could. My daughter, Calandra, is majoring in design and merchandising at Drexel University.

For the past decade, I have directed the public library in Bound Brook, a Central Jersey community known for its economic strife and downtown floods. Besides singing with *The New Yorker's* favorite choral group, I like to take fitness classes, dine out, shop, play word games, and view old, less-known Hollywood films.

Jane: You are an excellent photographer and have taken many photos for NAS. Could you tell us about how this interest developed



large audience, sharing hints and tips we've learned from experience to help you plan and execute a successful party. Recipes include ingredient quantities for 8, 24 and 50 people, with guidance on how to expand to serve up to 200 people . . . Not that anyone would want to do that on a regular basis!"

CDs: Our two-disk fortieth anniversary CD, containing forty-six pieces, is a special bargain at \$20. All CDs are available through the NAS website (nasingers.org). We also have in stock:

American Journey (1993), our twenty-fifth anniversary CD, issued in 1993, is sold for \$15.

Island of Hope (2002), featuring works by Ronald Perera, Randall Thompson, Paul Alan Levi, Ricky Ian Gordon, and Leonard Bernstein, is yours for \$15.

Concert CDs: We have CDs left over from most of our concerts going back to 1990. We are making them available at the clearance sale rate of just \$10 (including shipping and postage). Fill in the gaps in your collection for pennies per song! Send one to a friend out of town at our expense!

Donate to NAS

Like other amateur organizations, NAS operates on a tight

(pun intended)?

Hannah: Capturing a moment appeals to me, whether this involves people I know or a sight that is intriguing. With photography, the elements of composition are already present; I just have to select and arrange them for a pleasing effect.

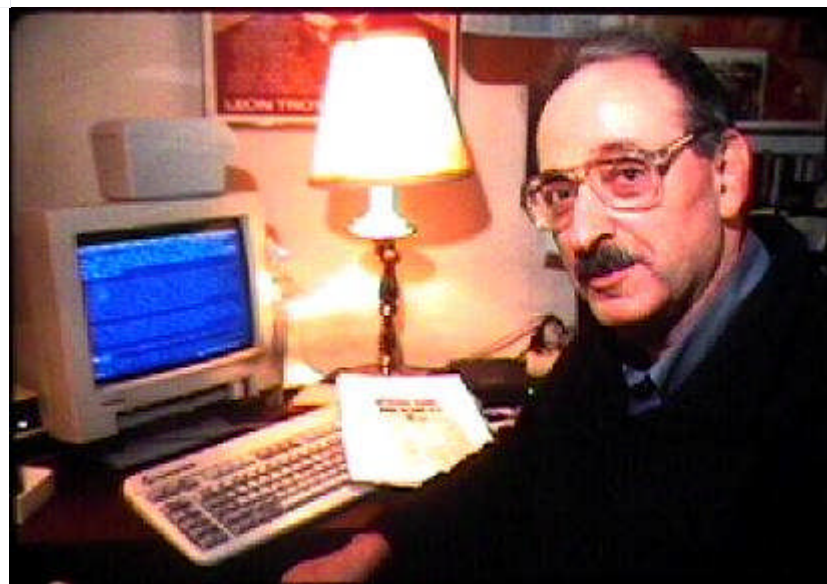
Jane: I remember how beautifully you designed the tables at our Christmas concert. Is this an interest of yours?

Hannah: When I was growing up, my mother hosted her book club's annual Christmas meeting. I recall her methodical preparation: cutting fresh evergreens and holly sprigs; combining them with silk poinsettias or ribbons to decorate the mantelpiece, the mirrors, and the top of her great-great-great-grandfather's grandfather clock; setting out embroidered linens, the Billingsley Rose Spode china and the silver service; and symmetrically arranging candlesticks of varying heights on the tables. The garishness of the 1970s never entered our house. When that Thursday arrived, the refreshments were ready to be served, and the evening went exactly as planned.

I did not help at all. My immediate concern was missing *Bewitched* on television, but the process made an impression on me. With NAS members volunteering their time and culinary skills, I've drawn on my background in crafts to make each reception festive. I've also coordinated receptions for church and the library, ranging from a retirement party (using my Spode and silver) to the library's grand reopening celebration.

Jane: You are on the Operating Board of NAS. What makes you devote so much time and energy to our chorus?

Hannah: After many years of stimulating and rewarding experiences, I'd like to do more for the chorus. I've learned so much by participating as a singer and volunteer, and I'm learning more by serving on the board.



budget, so we appreciate your help very much.

Please visit us on the web and show your support by making a tax-deductible donation: <http://nasingers.org/donate.html>

You can also send a check made out to NAS. Our address is NAS, Box 373, New York, NY 10025.

Chorister Walter Daum: Bass and Radical Mathematician

an interview by Jane Barry

Jane: Walter, how long have you been singing with NAS, and what interested you in joining the chorus? Have you sung with other choruses?

Walter: Susan and I joined in fall 1994. I'd sung in choruses in high school and college, and occasionally thereafter. One of the few things I regret in my life is that for years, we didn't realize that there was such a thing as an auditioned amateur chorus. We chose NAS because of its reputation for doing a varied and nonstandard repertoire. One reason we've stayed is that, unlike a few other directors I've sung with, Clara insists on and succeeds in getting the chorus to perform fully up to its abilities.

Jane: I know that you and your wife, Susan, sing in the chorus together. Are there pros and cons to this shared interest?

Walter: The pro is that we like doing things together; we first met through singing. I can't think of any cons.

Jane: What kinds of volunteer work have you done for NAS, and why have you gotten involved with the chorus's volunteer tasks?

Walter: I started off by showing up early to set up the chairs. Since 1995, I've been the compiler and editor of most of NAS's concert programs—about three-quarters of them since then. (For anyone who wants old programs, I've managed to save the computer files all the way back despite the demise of several computers over the years.)

NAS does more thorough programs than most choruses. We offer full texts and full translations where needed, as well as very thorough program notes. There are often interesting problems that arise, such as historical facts or translation issues, and several people in the chorus have expertise to draw on. In a way, it's strange to take the trouble to get these details right, since I suspect that most copies of our program are read once or just skimmed. But I enjoy—probably perversely—the process of consulting with others and working out the pesky details.

Jane: What do you do outside of NAS? Also, tell me about your interest in politics and how that has affected your career and your personal life.

Walter: I taught mathematics at City College for thirty-five years. It was a wonderful way to earn a living, showing students the beauty and logic of scientific thinking.

Back in the 1960s, I got caught up in the radicalization, first over racial discrimination, and then over the Vietnam War. I joined the movements against these evils, and my intellectual preoccupation turned to figuring out why racism and imperialism existed. I started to find explanations in Marxism, especially Marx's economic theory, and then was faced with the contradiction that "Marxist" countries like the Soviet Union were among the most oppressive on earth. I was

consumed with working out why the Russian Revolution, made in the hope of doing away with the exploitation and misery that capitalism rests on, had come to embody the opposite of those hopes. I wrote a book summarizing what I and several co-thinkers had learned about Stalinism, which came out just as the USSR was imploding and China was turning openly to capitalism, more or less as we had foreseen decades earlier. Marx's theory is also the best foundation for understanding the economic crisis of today, which is what I am working on currently.

As a by-product of my socialist activism, I became momentarily notorious twice during my years in NAS. Shortly after the reactionary terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, I spoke at a teach-in at City College and argued that the U.S. government did not have the moral right to wage war

in response. I summarized the history of U.S. support for repressive regimes and military intervention, which had created the mass hatred of America's role that the bin Ladens feed on. I also noted that the U.S. under Reagan had armed and funded the predecessors of some of these terrorists—labeling them not mass murderers, as I did, but “freedom fighters.” For that, the *New York Post* appointed me its Creep of the Week, and I had the honor of being denounced by Lynne Cheney (the former vice president's wife) for “moral relativism” and other sins. Members of the City University Board of Trustees demanded that I be fired but did nothing about it.

The second moment came during the 2004 presidential campaign, when John Kerry held a Town Meeting at City College. He called on several people to speak, most of whom had only admiring things to say. I also spoke, condemning his “stay the course” position on the Iraq War. He—to his credit—actually engaged in a short back-and-forth debate. That exchange got onto the front page of the *New York Times* (it was a slow news day) and from there to what seemed like every paper in the world. Rush Limbaugh got into the act by denouncing Kerry for, among other things, not rejecting my characterization of the war as imperialist. The next day, Limbaugh decided that since Democrats were all Communists, anyway, I should be their candidate, not Kerry. The button that Limbaugh created for my alleged campaign is still on his website—one of life's little oddities.

How did all this affect my career? Less than might be expected. In 1969, I had joined with other mostly young faculty members to support a student occupation of campus buildings protesting the fact that such a tiny percentage of admissions were accounted for by blacks and Latinos. The result was CUNY's Open Admissions policy. Most of the untenured faculty activists who taught history or sociology found themselves out of their jobs within a few years; but the few of us who taught in math and science survived because our departments weren't concerned about our political views. Fortunately, not every academic administrator had forgotten the rights that this country is supposed to stand for.

As for affecting my personal life, as a socialist I have met some of the world's most dedicated people who battle for the rights and dignity that all of us deserve. Many of them face far harsher conditions than I ever have—in, for example, South Africa, Palestine, and China. One more personal comment: Lenin is reported to have said that he loved

listening to Beethoven but couldn't afford to be distracted. I disagree: beautiful music, like mathematics, constantly reminds us what the human race is capable of. We should be able to create a beautiful society, too.



Clara Longstreth, Rick Bonsall and Dana Crowell in a photo finish

Extrachoricular Activities: 5K Run/Walk

by Jane Barry and Ray Scheindlin

On Tuesday, May 4, members of NAS participated in a 5K Run/Walk on Riverside Drive. Organized by Jenny Pham as a fund-raising event, the run turned out to be just a fun extrachoricular activity. As Jenny put it, "We came together as a group, wanting to spend time together, bringing together our new members and long-standing members of the chorus. It's about doing something new as a community."

The run/walk followed a course from the 116th Street entrance to the park to 91st Street, where the river-level walk ends (temporarily) in a grill fence, and included a loop amid the cherry trees on the park's middle level. The run began at the fearful hour of 7 A.M. and benefited from perfect spring temperatures and an interesting sky. Those who spent the race not running but manning one of the several watering stations along the way could while away the time between runners by contemplating the unusual cloud formation—a low, dark blanket hanging over the city and the river and ending abruptly over New Jersey, exposing a limpid cerulean stretch of sky to the horizon.

Even an event that is "just for fun" requires a lot of organization. To complicate matters, Jenny, who has organized several of NAS's fund-raising events in the last few years, had just gotten married the week before the run/walk. (This development was first made known among our membership when Jenny turned up at a board meeting, announcing, "So sorry I'm late, but I spent today getting married in Connecticut, and we had awful traffic getting back to New York"!). Jenny enlisted the help of her shiny new husband, Ryan Murphy and of a number of choristers. She also secured the necessary permits and rounded up the equipment. Several choristers who live near

Riverside Drive offered their apartments for runners/walkers to shower, dress, and use the bathrooms. Several members offered donations to sponsor other members for the run/walk.

Although the event was not actually a race, there was considerable interest in the question of who broke the tape at the finish line. All observers agree that this photo finish was too close to call.

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