



Grace Notes

Newsletter of New Amsterdam Singers

May 2012

Jane Barry and Nate
Mickelson, Co-Editors

Join us for

Songs of Birds and Angels

Thursday, May 31
8 p.m.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch
Church
552 West End Avenue at 87th
Street

Reserve tickets today!

www.nasingers.org

Six composers, from Brahms through Matt Harris, use poetry on the lark, the falcon, the bat, and a caged bird, while Rautavaara evokes angelic sounds in a setting of Rilke's first elegy.Â

The program includes works by Brahms, Copland, Crabtree, Harris, Mechem, Rautavaara and Stucky.

**Bring NAS Home with
You!**

CDs: Our two-disc fortieth-



Birdsong and Other Melodies of May

by Nate Mickelson

Imagine an evening of birdsong and other spring melodies filling one of New York City's finest acoustic spaces. Now add the poetry of Rilke and sixty-plus well-rehearsed and jewel-toned singers from the City's leading avocational chorus, and you'll have "Songs of Birds and Angels," New Amsterdam Singers's final concert of the 2011-12 season at St. Ignatius of Antioch Church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan at 8pm on Thursday, May 31. The program is rich with images and sounds of renewal and ranges from Shakespeare to Edward Lear and from Brahms to Americans Kirke Mechem and Steven Stucky. Not only that, it includes two New York City premieres, Stucky's *Skylarks*, and *Shakespeare Songs, Book VI*, from long-time friend of the chorus, Matthew Harris. I spoke recently with Music Director Clara Longstreth about the repertoire and preparations and am delighted to report that the concert has all the makings of another signature performance!

Planning for this program, as Clara explained to me, began when she chanced to meet Steven Stucky a few years back on a panel judging new music for a competition sponsored by C4, the small New York-based chorus known to some in the NAS family through former Assistant Conductor David Rentz. Intrigued by Stucky's depth of knowledge, Clara asked if he wrote for chorus and discovered a treasury of new music to explore. *Skylarks*, the suite that anchors the program, distributes six varied texts among the choir and a small group of soprano and alto voices. While the texts convey very different views of the lark, shared aural textures knit the sections together and, combined, will surely leave eyes and ears peeled for a next encounter with the eponymous bird.

From the end to the beginning and an American classic, Aaron Copland's "Lark." The piece evokes morning in the countryside, first in the voice of tenor soloist Andr   Guthman and then in syncopation that turns thoughts expectantly to the Eastern horizon. Copland's writing is so effective, as Clara

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

American Journey (1993), our twenty-fifth anniversary CD, which sells 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 from most of our concerts going back to 1990. A particular treasure is Choral Classics of Our Time, the December 2007 concert, including pieces by Arvo Pärt, Gustav Holst, Krzysztof Penderecki, Benjamin Britten, and Trond Kverno. We are making this and other concert CDs 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!

Cookbook: NAS's own cookbook, *Cooking for Crowds*, features recipes from decades of chorus benefits and tips for making your event a success. The cookbook is \$59 for the hard cover, and \$39 for soft cover (plus \$7.25 for shipping and handling). The cookbook is available online: www.cookingforcrowds.org.

For more information about these great items, please contact the chorus at info@nasingers.org.

explains in the program notes, that "the work ends on an astonished "Ah!", as if the viewer has suddenly witnessed the sunrise." Mechem's "The Caged Bird," a setting of Paul Laurence Dunbar's famous poem "Sympathy" and a fitting complement to "Lark," imagines birdsong as a figure for the persistence of the will. "I know why the caged bird sings," Dunbar asserts in the poem, "it is not a carol of joy or glee." He sings that "he would be free."

Prominent internationally, Einojuhani Rautavaara is often considered a minimalist, perhaps not the musical style one would immediately associate with the densely mystical poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. *Die Erste Elegie*, Rautavaara's setting of the first of the *Duino Elegies*, shifts the program from birds to angels, appropriately and perhaps imperceptibly in performance, given the rich sonorities of St. Ignatius of Antioch. While Rilke's German is complex and somewhat esoteric (kudos to singer Arden Rogow-Bales for his precise coaching at rehearsal), Rautavaara's melodies more than compensate, ringing true particularly in the tenor section, which, Clara reports, get the best melody of all!

The Chamber Chorus, my temporary home for this cycle, adds timeless Brahms, a tuneful Irish folk melody and the aforementioned premiere of Harris's sixth book of *Shakespeare Songs*. Birds and musical styles proliferate in the set. Harris's *Songs* alone introduce bees, cuckoos, owls and even bats, and in the case of "Where the Bee Sucks, There Suck I," the arrangement suggests what might be rightly called background vocals. The common element is that each piece alludes to folksong or folk lyrics. Where the selections from Brahms's *Lieder und Romanzen* are common love poems and Crabtree's "The Lark in the Clear Air" is a traditional Irish tune, Harris's three are songs from *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*. As in most of Shakespeare's plays, these songs are the province of clowns, fools, and other regular folk. Of the three, "Fear No More" resonates most with me: since we are all headed down the same road in more ways than one, if you'll pardon my very liberal summary of the text, why not stop and sing awhile?

All that to say, "Songs of Birds and Angels" is not to be missed. Whether you prefer tightly constructed and exquisitely set 19th century German harmony, ethereal and inspiring contemporary sounds, or the pleasures of good, old-fashioned love songs, you will find something to enjoy. And with New Amsterdam Singers returning to St. Ignatius of Antioch after a long absence, who knows what magic lies in wait. A flock of birds? An exaltation?!



Sylvain and Emmanuelle sing with their son and daughter, Maël and Lœa, at the December Caroling Reception.

An Interview with Power Couple Sylvain Demongeot and Emmanuelle Gresse

by Jane Barry

Jane: Emmanuelle and Sylvain, you have been in the chorus for several years now. How did you both get involved with NAS?

Emmanuelle & Sylvain: We met through our chorus in Paris (Chœur Symphonique de Paris). Singing is such a part of our couple's life that we couldn't imagine not to have a chorus in New York. We started looking for a chorus right after we moved in, in September 2009. We had little time before the singing season would begin, so we used a scientific approach: we found a few interesting groups through the Web and tried four of them, auditioning and attending a few rehearsals in each group. Eventually we couldn't decide between the New Amsterdam Singers and the Oratorio Society of New York, both groups having such generous conductors and great complementary repertoire. We wanted to get the most of our New York experience, so we chose to stick to both groups and never regretted it.

Jane: Tell us about your life in France and what you will do when you return? Where do you live?

Emmanuelle & Sylvain: When we go back to Paris, Emmanuelle will create a new practice as a speech therapist for adults and children while Sylvain will still work for the same New York company through the Internet. Of course we will go back to our old chorus and friends. But we're likely to audition for more challenging choruses in Paris in the future, as our New York experience raised our expectations!

Jane: How did you get interested in music and singing growing up? Was your family musical?

Emmanuelle: Singing is our passion and it's directly related to our story. I was

born in a protestant family so I have sung since I am very young at church and at home. My mother was a physician but very musical. She is still playing the organ. So I have great memories of singing canticles with her as she played the organ. My father had terrible intonation, to my mother's dismay. On vacation, my uncle, my sisters and I joyfully sang chanson in the southern countryside.

I began to sing in a choir and play the piano at the music school when I was about 10. When I was 18 I sang in a small a cappella chorus and later in bigger choruses in Bourges and Paris. I've always sung.

Sylvain: When I was young my father used to sing great chanson with his guitar. But I didn't get to learn music seriously. As a student I got involved in drama groups, but after the last group fell apart I wanted to try something else. I stumbled upon a recruitment flyer for a group that was to perform Mozart's requiem. I never had imagined it possible for me to participate in serious music. But the group was open to complete beginners if they could memorize music. Eventually I liked it so much that I took music theory and singing lessons.

Jane: What was your experience living in New York and would you like to return?

Emmanuelle: My experience of New York was very rich and deep. The first months were not easy, as I was not used to being unemployed. My skills in English were minimal and I had trouble understanding the American accent. Also, I was very anxious for my father, who was already very sick.

Singing in choruses with such welcoming members was uplifting: it was the blooming of my New York life. During those three years, I visited New York by myself a lot. I took English, piano and voice lessons and practiced yoga and Tai Chi. Many friends and family stayed in our apartment on Roosevelt Island. We visited many places on both coasts of the US with our two teenagers. Maël and L'œa went to school at the Lycee Français and I could see every day how they enjoyed their life in New York. We have been so lucky to be able to spend so much time with our new American friends.

In short, this sabbatical gave me inner fulfillment and time for reflexion and discoveries.

Sylvain: I didn't have as much time for touring the City as Emmanuelle did, but I enjoyed every bit of time I spent in New York. One of the great joys of choruses is to meet and make friends with people of all ages and backgrounds. Thanks to music we never felt strangers here.

Needless to say, we'll miss it all. We fly back to Paris on July 26, the day our visa expires, at 11:20 PM! I'll come back from time to time for my work and hopefully Emmanuelle will be able to join sometimes. In a few years, when the kids have finished their studies, maybe we can return and spend more time here.

Jane: What are some high points in your time with NAS?

Emmanuelle & Sylvain: From the start we appreciated how Clara, while knowing exactly what she wants, always remains kind, open and patient during rehearsals -- not a major quality of Parisian chorus conductors! Every program we sang with the NAS was great, and a unique opportunity for us to discover a rich repertoire of contemporary American music we didn't even

knew existed. We bought a lot of the sheet music we sang after returning the chorus's copies as we hope we can introduce this music to French choruses and audiences.

Of course the tour in Cuba was a highlight: not only we shared musical experiences with Cuban singers and children, but we also got to know NAS members and their significant others better. Countless great memories with our friends from our New York choruses, in and out of singing, are the very wealth we bring back to Paris.Â

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