

Program Notes

by Allison Voth

In January, we brought you the voices of European women composers. Tonight, we fly back across the Atlantic to present to you an evening of American women composers. The concert shall begin with the old guard of American women composers, Amy Beach, Margaret Bonds, and Ruth Crawford who, each in her own way, broke new ground as composers. And then you will hear the next wave of female composers that followed, many first- and second-generation children of immigrants, not of the cultural or economic privilege that many of the European women composers had as musicians. They represent the melting pot of America—the essence of what America stands for. They are what makes America unique and vibrant in the arts. Many of their ancestors fought to stay alive as outsiders, and they as women composers, also outsiders, have fought their way to be heard through the quagmire of inequalities in a composition world still primarily dominated by men. The second generation of women composers on this concert who refused to step aside have attained recognition and renown not only as composers, but also as performers, teachers, scholars, founders of organizations, and administrators, and many while also raising families. They are still going strong, and they still have a lot to say. In a nutshell, they beat the odds in a society bent on keeping them home, and they truly paved the way for our Generation X female composers who are young, emboldened, demanding and ever-growing in numbers with important and innovative voices in music. Today's Generation X women composers are more easily finding their rightful place in the world of composition, and their equal place in the world of composition among men is nigh. So, sit back, make yourself comfortable, and prepare to hear and celebrate some remarkable music, including a world premiere by Boston's beloved composer, Marjorie Merryman. Be forewarned, the hearts and minds of these women composers are passionate, so fasten your seatbelts!

Sheila Silver (b. 1946)

A native of Seattle, WA, Silver received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of California at Berkeley in 1968 during which time she turned to composing and studied with Edwin Dugger. Upon graduation, she was awarded the coveted George Ladd Prix de Paris—a two-year study in Europe where she worked with Erhard Karkoschka in Stuttgart and Gyorgy Ligeti in Berlin and Hamburg. She earned her doctorate from Brandeis University where she studied with Arthur Berger, Harold Shapero, and Seymour Shifrin. Her studies also included an Abraham Sachar Traveling Grant, which enabled her to spend 18 months in London, and a Koussevitzky Fellowship for a summer at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood where she studied with Jacob Druckman. Silver writes for all genres, including film music. She has received commissions and performances by major ensembles and soloists throughout the US and Europe. Her music is richly colored with innovative writing techniques and rhythmic intensity strongly influenced by world music. Awards include the Sackler

Prize in Music Composition for Opera for her 2010 opera, *The Wooden Sword*; Bunting Institute Fellowship; the Rome Prize, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Composer Award; twice winner of the ISCM National Composers Competition; and awards and commissions from the Rockefeller Foundation (Bellagio Residency), the Carmargo Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, New York State Council of the Arts, the Barlow Foundation, the Paul Fromm Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Cary Trust Fund, and the New American Cinema Award. Silver is currently Professor of Music at the State University of New York, Stony Brook.

In 2013, *Beauty Intolerable*, a songbook based on the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay, was premiered in Hudson, New York and New York City, with performances by Lauren Flanigan, Deanne Meek, and Risa Renae Harman and poetry recitations by Tyne Daley and Tandy Cronyn. The work has since been performed by numerous artists in various venues, including at Tanglewood.

Amy Beach (1867-1944)

Amy Beach, née Cheney, was considered America's foremost woman composer of her time. Born into a prominent New England family, her musical brilliance was evident from a very young age, including a keen ear, which would have given Mozart a run for his money had they been contemporaries. She was brilliant in every way. She held a passion for science and philosophy, and she spoke French and German fluently. Her parents were encouraged to send Beach to Europe for a traditional European Conservatory education, but they decided to have her study locally—perhaps, because she was a woman? We'll never know. She studied piano with two prominent teachers at the time and took one year of harmony and counterpoint lessons with Junius W. Hill. She was essentially self-taught as a composer using the greats as her teachers, studying their scores and musical treatises. Her parents also asked friends who were recognized scholars, musicians, and writers to act as her mentors, including Longfellow, Groschius, Wendell Holmes and Harris Aubrey Beach, the latter she ultimately married at age 18. She debuted as a concert pianist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at the age of 16. Her husband, however, asked her to curtail her concertizing, which she dutifully did. This led her to turn more seriously towards composing. Although she composed for all genres large and small, she became particularly well known for her songs. Hers were not sweet parlor tunes set to simple harmonic accompaniments. On the contrary, many of her songs were harmonically sophisticated and often chromatically challenging, reflecting her deep love for words and the necessity to elevate text through music. Beach also had a penchant for using folk elements in her music, and she strongly associated keys with colors. After her husband died in 1910, she immediately took up concertizing again, and traveled to Europe to establish herself both as a concert pianist and composer. She was positively received on both accounts and only returned to America due to the outbreak of World War I. As a composer, she was considered part of the Second New England School and was greatly respected by her fellow composers, prompting one to say to her, "I always feel a thrill of pride myself whenever I hear a fine new work by any one of

us, and as such you will have to be counted in, whether you will or not - one of the boys." She broke ground on many levels for women composers in her time and worked hard to support young women composers, by founding the Society of American Women Composers and serving as Dean of American Woman Composers.

The Year's at the Spring, the beloved and oft sung song for generations of singers, was dedicated to the Browning Society of Boston. The writing for both the singer and pianist captures the inherent exuberance of Robert Browning's poem, which is an excerpt from *Pippa Passes*.

Forgotten is a fine example of Beach's innate ability to write fluid and beautiful vocal lines, and *In the Twilight* is an example of Beach's keen harmonic sensibility. The piano accompaniment's undulating harmonic twists and turns brilliantly reflects the text.

Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

Margaret Bonds was a composer, pianist, and educator. Born in Chicago, her father was a doctor and her mother was an organist who provided her first lessons in music. Their household saw a constant flow of black artists, writers, and musicians, including Will Marion Cook and Florence Price, who taught Bonds both piano and composition. She got her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees from Northwestern, and she eventually attended Juilliard for further graduate work studying piano with Djane Herz and composition with Starer and Harris. She performed regularly throughout the United States and Canada. As a composer, she became primarily known for her songs and spirituals, winning the Wanamaker Prize for her song *Sea Ghosts* in 1932. She also produced several theater works. In the 1930s, Bonds opened the Allied Arts Academy in Chicago. While in New York she taught and mentored at many arts institutions and invested her efforts in fostering young black musicians and composers. She also taught at the Inner City Institute and the Inner City Repertory Theater in Los Angeles. Her music has a decided jazz harmonic influence, and spiritual music plays a significant role in her writing.

Songs of the Seasons were a commission by tenor Lawrence Watson in 1955, and premiered at Town Hall in 1956. This was the second song cycle which she compiled, including four songs composed between 1934 and 1955, *Poème d'automne* being the earliest song and *Summer Storm* the latest composed. In *Poème d'automne*, one clearly hears the strong influence of African-American folk songs, including syncopation, blues harmonies, modal melodies, polyrhythms between the vocal and piano parts, and syncopations. *Summer Storm* is decidedly programmatic in the piano accompaniment which begins with the distant rumbling thunder of the summer storm written using chromaticism and driving rhythms. Slower sections, the calm after the storm, incorporate blues sonorities and languid lines reflecting the lingering humid and sultry post storm air.

Libby Larsen (b. 1950)

Libby Larsen is one of America's most prolific composers today. She has written

extensively for voice, including many song cycles and 15 operas, but her *oeuvre* includes major works in every genre. USA today touted her as “the only English-speaking composer since Benjamin Britten who matches great verse with fine music so intelligently and expressively.” She won a GRAMMY for the CD *The Art of Arlene Augér*, and she has the distinction of being the first American woman to serve as a resident composer with a major American orchestra. She has had countless commissions from renowned artists, including Benita Valente and Frederika Von Stade. An ardent supporter of young composers, she and Stephen Paulus founded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now the American Composers Forum.

My Antonia was commission by soprano Jane Dressler at Kent State University with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ohio Arts Council and the Nebraska Arts Council, and premiered in 2002. The songs are based on Willa Cather's novel, *My Antonia*, which Libby Larsen adapted for the cycle. They recount Jim Burden's memories of Antonia Shimerda during their shared experiences of the pioneering period of European settlement on the tall-grass prairie of the American Midwest. Larsen paints the prairie landscape through her arcing vocal lines and open-voiced voicings, paired with an ominous driving rhythm that begins and ends the set, mixed meters, and, at times, disturbing dissonant harmonies that tell a story of a childhood dream of whimsy and freedom jolted awake by the painful acts of adults struggling to survive the cruelties of immigrant life.

Marjorie Merryman (b. 1951)

Composer Marjorie Merryman has been commissioned and performed throughout the United States and in many countries in Europe and Asia. Her catalogue includes orchestral, choral, vocal and chamber music, as well as an opera and two oratorios. She has been the recipient of numerous awards, including prizes from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Walter Hinrichsen Award, the League of Composers/International Society for Contemporary Music, the WBZ Fund for the Arts, Composers-Inc (Lee Ettelson Award), and the New York State Council for the Arts. Her fellowships and grants include Tanglewood, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and the National Endowment for the Arts. She has been Composer-in-Residence of the New England Philharmonic and the Billings (MT) Symphony Orchestra and has served on the boards of the New England Composers' Orchestra, the Lili Boulanger Foundation, and many others. Her works are published by C.F. Peters, E.C. Schirmer, APNM, and G. Schirmer; and recorded on the Koch and New World labels. Marjorie Merryman teaches composition at Manhattan School of Music, where until 2017 she also served as Provost and Senior Vice President. Previously, she taught for 23 years at Boston University and has also taught at Harvard, New England Conservatory, and Macalester College.

Poet Sarah Cohen lives and writes in Seattle, WA. Her poems and other writings have appeared in the Paris Review, Boston Review, Zocalo Public Square, and others. Regarding *Two Songs*, Marjorie Merryman writes:

“It has been a special pleasure to set two these two beautiful poems by my daughter, Sarah Cohen. Both these texts are concerned with time and with

the incomprehensible nature of both mortality and immortality. *The Heart* gives an imaginative, yearning voice to our 'striving, blind' physical nature. In setting the text, I tried to expand on its images and to let the end coalesce into a palpable heartbeat whose pulsation simply, finally stops. The second song is based on the fate of *Cassiopeia*, a mythical Ethiopian queen who boasted that she and her daughter Andromeda were more beautiful than the goddesses of the sea. The sea god Poseidon punished her by binding her to a throne in the heavens, where she sits in darkness for eternity, her constellation circling the north star. The poem offers a touching image of *Cassiopeia* as a passenger on a night train, sitting half-conscious through an endless journey. In my setting, I tried to capture some of the spaciousness of this celestial story, and some of its futile, eternal circularity."

Lori Laitman (b. 1955)

A native of Long Beach, New York, Laitman grew up in a distinctly musical family. She received her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music from Yale where she studied composition. Her compositional output is primarily vocal, totaling over 250 songs, several choral works and operas, including *The Scarlet Letter* premiered by Opera Colorado in 2016, a children's opera, *The Three Feathers*, and two operas in process. She recently wrote an oratorio based on the Holocaust called *Vedem*, commissioned by Music of Remembrance. The Journal of Singing stated, "It is difficult to think of anyone before the public today who equals her exceptional gifts for embracing a poetic text and giving it new and deeper life through music." Laitman writes,

"In the summer of 2007, Paul-André Bempéchat of The Lyrica Society for WordMusic Relations, asked me to compose a song cycle in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Even though their lives were tragically cut short, their legacy lives on. The two poems I chose reflect on life, death, and the notion of legacy. Both poems are unpublished and were sent to me by the poets themselves.

'Partial Lunar Eclipse, Sept. 7th, 2006' was written by Anne Ranasinghe. Anne was born in Essen, Germany in 1925. In 1939, when she was thirteen, her family sent her to England to escape the Nazis. Her entire family was murdered by the Nazis, but Anne survived. She married a Sinhalese Professor of the Colombo Medical Faculty, moved to Sri Lanka (where she resides), raised a family, and began writing poetry and prose in the early 1970s. She has published nine books and has won numerous prizes for her works. This beautiful poem is a reflection on the mystery and timelessness of the universe as well as her realization that she is nearing the end of her life. For me, it serves as a reminder that the world goes on, and we are part of this infinity. The song itself has an air of mystery about it, created by a repetitive figuration in the accompaniment that runs throughout the song. Within this framework, I use 'word painting' to mirror the text: for

example, the melody and harmony both slip down and then back up as the orb slips from 'penumbra' to 'umbra'; and the bass of the accompaniment quickens, as the orb begins to 'sail its lonely journey.' The voice hits a climax, emphasizing the idea of a 'link with the infinite universe.' The original pacing returns and then eventually slows, marking the idea of 'no return.' The harmonies are left unresolved.

For over 30 years, poet John Wood taught at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, LA. In 2006, his colleague, composer Keith Gates, discovered that he had incurable cancer. Keith asked John to write a poem that could be read at his funeral and John responded with 'A Pastoral Lament.' I found this to be an exceptionally beautiful poem. Its message of love and grief, mixed with an appreciation for an enduring legacy, is particularly appropriate for this song cycle. The opening musical idea is derived from my setting of the words 'Sweet, sweet singing shepherd boy.' This melodic cell appears throughout the song in various guises. To underscore the notion that 'music will not end,' the piano takes the theme from the voice near the end of the song, and the phrase hangs unfinished, seemingly in mid-air."

Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953)

Crawford's life was relatively short, but her contributions to the development of early modernism in composition in the 1920s and 30s, and the promotion and preservation of American folk music in the late 1940s and 50s are profound. She grew up in the Midwest and studied piano and composition at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Her piano teacher, Djane Lavoie Herz, was a disciple of Scriabin. While in Chicago, she met Carl Sandburg and contributed folksong arrangement to his landmark anthology, *The American Songbag*. Sandburg greatly influenced Crawford Seeger regarding his ideas on poetry and philosophical ideals and subsequently, many of her vocal works are set to his text. In the 1920s she also met Henry Cowell who took her under his wing and brought her into the circle of the 'ultra-moderns' which included composer Charles Seeger, who taught her dissonant counterpoint. She became a protégée of Seeger's and with him she assisted in revising his treatise "Tradition and Experiment in New Music," a manual on Dissonant Counterpoint. She eventually married Seeger, and his ideas were crucial to the development of her second-style period (1930-1933), a brief, but fruitful period. During this time, Cowell invited her to be on the board of his New Music Society, and she had several works published in his New Music Quarterly. She also became a board member of the Pro Music Society and in 1928 was a founding member of the Chicago Chapter of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM).

In 1930 she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition. She was the first woman to be named a Guggenheim Fellow and only one of five in the following 15 years. She spent her year abroad mostly in Berlin, saying "In Berlin I studied with no one." This was apparently her way of stating that she did not study with Schoenberg,

but her exposure to the music of Bartók and Berg greatly inspired her. Virgil Thompson wrote of her “Quartet 131” as being: “in every way a distinguished, a noble piece of work.” After marrying Charles Seeger, they both joined the composition faculty of the New School for Social Research, but in 1936 they moved to Washington D.C., where her husband was appointed to the music division of the Resettlement Agency. While there, Crawford turned to her love of folk music and worked closely with John and Alan Lomax at the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. The couple became one of the most important families in the folk music revival of the 1930s-40s. Not surprisingly, Pete Seeger, the leading folk song writer and performer, was her step-son. During her time in Washington, she composed only one work, *Rissolty Rossolty*, an American Fantasia for Orchestra based on folk tunes commissioned by CBA for its radio series *American School of the Air*. Although she spent only six years seriously composing classical works, she broke ground in her application of serialism, taking it far beyond the parameters of many of her male colleagues. She also had eclectic interests, including theosophy, Eastern mysticism, American literary transcendentalism, and a penchant for the works of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. Her abandonment of full-time composing and shift to researching, promoting and preserving folk music was a decided choice. Folk music became a vehicle for expressing political ideas and bringing communities together. Her brilliance continued to shine through as she quickly became known for her transcriptions and for developing music programs utilizing folk music for a progressive private school in the Washington area, resulting in *American Folksongs for Children* (1948) to great accolades. Her folksong transcriptions were praised as impeccable, and her arrangements as faithful to both the soul and the spirit of the original filed recording that were so often their source. She summed up her credo as a desire to give people “a taste for the thing itself.”

Chinaman, Laundryman! depicts the social abuse of an immigrant Chinese laundry worker. It is told through the eyes of both the immigrant and his boss. It employs the vocal technique of *Sprechstimme* (speaksinging) and is brilliantly set to complex tonal and rhythmic variations and treatments of a 9-note tone row, equaling one measure. It is a timeless piece and could have been written today. Crawford's complex compositional writing was very typical at the time. The accompaniment's relentless drive reflects the oppressive and inescapable abusive situation the Chinese immigrant finds himself in, and the ascending and descending vocal lines reflect the status of the boss and immigrant respectively.

Kamala Sankaram (b. 1978)

Kamala Sankaram is one of America's “hot” young composers who straddles the classical and independent music line. A trained singer who still performs, she is passionate about writing for voice, through song, opera, and music theater in particular. She has already seen great success with her first opera *MIRANDA*, composed while in residence at the HERE Arts Center, and which subsequently won the New York Innovative Theatre Award for Outstanding Production of a musical. Her

second opera, *THUMBPRINT* was featured in the 2014 PROTOTYPE Festival, a Beth Morrison Project production. She has received commissions from Washington Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Beth Morrison Projects, Opera on Tap, Opera Memphis, and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. She is the recipient of many awards, including the Jonathan Larson Award from the American Theater Wing, Opera, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Kevin Spacey Foundation, and the MAP Fund. Residencies and fellowships include the MacDowell Colony, the Watermill Center, the Civilians, HERE Arts Center, CAP21 Con Edison/Exploring the Metropolis, the Hermitage, and American Lyric Theater. As a performer, she has performed and premiered music in the Beth Morrison Projects, including the PROTOTYPE Festival, Anthony Braxton and the Wooster Group, among others. She is also the leader of *Bombay Rikey*, an operatic Bollywood surf ensemble whose debut was named Best Eclectic Album by the Independent Music Awards Vox Pop. The Wall Street Journal described her as “an impassioned soprano with blazing high notes.” Sankaram also holds a PhD from the New School and is currently a member of the composition faculty at SUNY Purchase.

The Last Blast of Anthony the Trumpeter (or how Spuyten Duyvil Creek got its name) was commissioned by the Five Boroughs Music Festival for the Five Borough Songbook, Volume II. It is based on a short story by Washington Irving and the text was written by Kamala Sankaram. The hard-hitting song speaks for itself. The oft repeated Old Dutch phrase “En Spuyt den Duyvil, trotseer ik het Water!” translates to “In spite of the Devil, I will brave the water!”

Susan Botti (b. 1962)

A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Botti was provided a well-rounded arts education growing up. She received her Bachelor of Music from Berkley and her Master of Music in composition from the Manhattan School of Music. She is both a creative and performing artist who divides herself between composing and singing. Botti performs regularly with major orchestras and chamber ensembles, including the New York Philharmonic, The BBC Scottish Symphony, the American Composer's Orchestra, Orpheus Ensemble. Greatly respected by her fellow composers, she has had many works and/or roles written for her, including the role of “Water” in Tan Dun's *Marco Polo* which premiered at the Münchener Biennale, and later toured around the world. Her compositions reflect her strong interest in theatre and the visual arts and include traditional, improvisational, and non-classical composition and singing styles. Although she writes a great deal for voice, she has written for all genres with great success. Commissions include Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, American Artists Series among others. Her works have been performed in Europe and through the US, including such venues as Carnegie Hall and The Kennedy Center. She has been composer-in-residence with the Alabama Symphony Orchestra and she has received many awards including the Goddard Lieberman Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize, the 2011

Pushcart Prize, as well as grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Aaron Copland Foundation, the NY Foundation for the Arts, The Greenwall Foundation, The Jerome Foundation, ASCAP, and the Foundation of Contemporary Performance Arts. She was the third Daniel R. Lewis Composer Fellow with the Cleveland Orchestra where two works were premiered, *Impetuosity* and *Translucence*. Opera News Magazine described her music as “strikingly emotional music...” Botti taught composition at the University of Michigan from 2001-2006 and is currently on the composition faculty at the Manhattan School of Music and at Vassar College.

“*listen, it's snowing...*” is set to an excerpt from the e.e. cummings's poem, *Him*. Botti writes: “It is a delicate stream of consciousness which, for me, eloquently conveys love and loss and beauty.” They were premiered at The Manhattan School of Music in 1990.

Tania León (b. 1943)

Cuban-American Tania León received her early musical training in Cuba before moving to New York City in 1967 to study at New York University. León has had a rich and varied career composing, conducting, educating, advising for the arts, and advocating for young artists. Her fascinating career has been profiled on ABC, CBS, CNN, and PBS. Internationally recognized and sought after, she has been commissioned and performed by major orchestras, ensembles, and soloists including Kurt Masur with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the International Contemporary Ensemble, Ethos, Ursula Oppens and the Cassat Quartet, Dawn Upshaw, the New York State Council of the Arts for Symphony Space, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony, New World Symphony, Fest der Continente, Gewanhausorchester, L'orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the China National Symphony and the NDR Orchestra, Eastman School of Music and Syracuse University among many. As a conductor, León has performed with the New York Philharmonic, the Symphony Orchestra and Chorus of Marseille, the Orquesta Sinfonica de Asturias, Orquesta Filarmonica de Bogota, the Gewaunhausorchester, among many others. As an innovator and promoter of the arts, León was a founding member and first Music Director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and established the Dance Theatre's Music Department, Music School and Orchestra. In 1994, she also co-founded the American Composers Orchestra Sonidos de las Americas Festivals while in the post as Latin American Music Advisor. Awards include Honorary Doctorate Degrees from Colgate University, Oberlin and SUNY Purchase College, New York Governor's Lifetime Achievement Award, Symphony Space's Access to the Arts Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, and Fromm, Koussevitsky and Guggenheim Fellowships. She has also served as U.S. Artistic Ambassador of American Culture in Madrid, Spain. She maintains teaching posts at Brooklyn College and at the Graduate Center of CUNY and was named Distinguished Professor of the City University of New York in 2006.

Mi amore es was commissioned by Luigi Terruso and written for Robert Osborne and Todd Crow. Set to Caols Pintado's poem, it is a fine example of the Cuban-African influence in León's writing.