

Wednesdays@7 presents  
**Incandescent Tongues**

**Susan Narucki, soprano and Donald Berman, piano**

Wednesday, March 8, 2023 - 7:00 p.m.  
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

The Voice of Desire (2003)

Judith Weir (b. 1954)

The Voice of Desire  
White Eggs in the Bush  
Written on Terrestrial Things  
Sweet Little Red Feet

Issue  
Philosophie

Elizabeth Claisse (fl. 1922-1923)

Susan Narucki, soprano Donald Berman, piano

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*Erinnerung* (2018)

Elena Ruehr (b. 1963)

Donald Berman, piano

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Atwood Songs (2018)

Tania León (b. 1943)

Notes toward a poem that can never be written  
Memory  
Eating Fire  
Habitation  
Four Evasions

Four songs on texts of Edna St. Vincent Millay

Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

Even in the moment  
Feast  
What lips my lips have kissed  
I know my mind



## Program Notes:

Songs have always seemed to me to be small miracles; they inhabit a space in which the intention of a poet is combined with the unique musical framework and point of view of a composer. The best songs are an invitation to those who sing them, to enter into singular, worlds of imagination and bring them to life. But it would be disingenuous to imply that the performer's relationship to the process is a dispassionate one; for even while adhering to the specifics of notation to the greatest degree possible, we give a part of ourselves over to these ephemeral worlds; we must do so, in order to truly discover them.

Donald and I chose these songs as part of our ongoing project to discover and perform works by women composers for voice and piano, particularly those that are seldom heard, and are particularly glad to be presenting them on International Women's Day.

British composer Judith Weir (b. 1954) has written numerous works for voice over the course of her career. Her compositional palette is harmonically consonant and full of light, transparent textures; her music is full of unexpected rhythmical play within set forms, folk-like melodies and direct, unaffected expression. In her note about *The Voice of Desire*, Weir states "All the songs...are conversations between humans and birds. In each case, the birds seem to have a more sophisticated viewpoint than their human hearers."

Indeed, each of the four birds is telling us something. In the first song which gives the cycle its title, the intricate call of nightingale seems to the listener to be a representation of an idyllic, perfect world. In response, the nightingale explains that her song grows from longing that can never be fulfilled; it only lives in the listener's imagination. The cuckoo and coucal in the second song warn of the insanity of war. The tiny, aged thrush of the third song sings in a barren, winter landscape; its little song an unlikely beacon of hope. In the jaunty final song, the dove has already departed; its death leaves its owner puzzled. After all, the dove had everything – except its freedom.

I was led to the music of Elizabeth Claisse during the COVID-19 pandemic, while doing online research for the performance and recording project with Donald Berman, *This Island*, (recently released on AVIE Records.) Claisse is a mystery. The songs on tonight's program were composed in 1922 –1923 and published B. Roudanez in Paris. But no other information about the woman or her work exists. Claisse's songs reflect compositional trends of 1920's Paris; the spare, open textures, and repeated rhythmic motifs are evocative of the music of *Les Six*. I've grown to love these little songs. "Issue" describes the search for a loved one, lost at the forest's edge. "Philosophie" describes the ill-timed meeting of a flock of birds and ice-covered branches of a blossoming peach orchard.

American composer Elena Ruehr says of her music "the idea is that the surface be simple, the structure complex." In her note about the piano solo *Erinnerung*, she writes: "My husband and I went to hear David Deveau play a glorious concert of Schubert's Sonatas a few years ago, and my husband, a good amateur pianist, was so inspired he started playing the Sonatas at home, often at night when I was falling asleep. I heard these sonatas in my dreams, and *Erinnerung* is an evocation of that sound world, especially channeling Schubert's D959. The references to Schubert are sometimes direct, but often altered in slight ways to evoke the dreamy sense of time that occurs while sleeping."

Cuban-born American composer Tania León (b. 1943) was recently awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music and honored at the Kennedy Center. Ms. León's *Atwood Songs* (2018), a cycle of five songs written to poems celebrated feminist writer Margaret Atwood, are characterized by rhythmic vitality, bold use of instrumental timbre and color, and searingly expressive writing for the voice.

The songs traverse a broad range of perspectives, from the angular phrases of the opening song, describing the boxed-in feeling of thwarted ambitions, to the smoky, jazz-tinged improvisatory expressions of longing in the second and final songs (*Memory* and *Four Evasions*, respectively). The fourth song, *Habitation* provides a humorous (perhaps somewhat caustic) perspective about marriage. The third song, *Eating Fire*, with whirling dance rhythms is an expression of pure joy, exuberance and strength.

African American composer Margaret Bonds (1913-72) was a remarkable figure in American music history. Born to a relatively affluent family of professionals in segregated Chicago, she began studies in piano and composition at an early age, studying with Theodore Taylor of the Coleridge-Taylor Music School as well as with Florence Price. Bonds completed Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Music from Northwestern University; she composed music in a wide variety of genres, but is best known for her works for song settings of Langston Hughes. She was deeply attuned to social justice issues and worked tirelessly on behalf of African Americans in her community.

Bonds was also an ardent feminist, as was the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. *The Four Songs* on tonight's program were recently published by Hildegard Press in a new edited edition by the musicologist Michael Cooper. No date of composition can be found; one can surmise that these are in the mid-to-late period of Bonds' output. Bonds' music is beautifully written for the voice with a rich, quasi-orchestral piano accompaniment. The songs are rich with emotional expression; they illuminate St. Vincent Millay's unapologetic stance on the intensity of relationships between lovers in an unflinching manner, at times irreverent, and consistently uncompromising.

As always, I am deeply indebted to my friend and colleague, Donald Berman, with whom I have been making music for over thirty years, for his superb artistry and his never-ending enthusiasm for exploring unusual corners of the repertoire, which luckily matches my own.

-Susan Narucki

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## Texts:

### **The Voice of Desire (Robert Bridges)**

Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,  
And bright in the fruitful valleys the streams, wherefrom  
Ye learn your song:  
Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there,  
Among the flowers, which in that heavenly air  
Bloom the year long!

Barren are those mountains and spent the streams:  
Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,  
A throe of the heart.  
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,  
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,  
For all our art.

Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men  
We pour our dark nocturnal secret; and then,  
As night is withdrawn  
Dream, while the innumerable choir of day  
Welcome the dawn.

### **White Eggs in the Bush (Yoruba hunter's poem, translation Ulli Beier)**

The blue cuckoo lays white eggs in the bush.  
When war captures the town  
The blue cuckoo cries: "Kill twenty! Kill twenty!"  
The red-bellied coucal cries:  
"Kill thirty, kill thirty!"  
Then death will not fail to come,  
Then death will not fail to come.  
When men begin war,  
The blue cuckoo cries: "Fools, fools!"  
The red-bellied coucal cries:  
"The world is spoiled, the world is spoiled!"  
Then death cannot fail to come,  
Then death cannot fail to come.

### **Written on Terrestrial Things (Thomas Hardy)**

I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted nigh  
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
The Century's corpse outleant  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul,  
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy goodnight air,  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.

### **Sweet Little Red Feet (John Keats)**

I had a dove and the sweet dove died;  
And I have thought it died of grieving:  
Oh, what could it grieve for? Its feet were tied,  
With a silken thread of my own hand's weaving;  
Sweet little red feet! Why should you die-  
Why should you leave me, sweet dove! Why?  
You liv'd alone on the forest-tree,  
Why, pretty thing! Could you not live with me?  
I kiss'd you oft and gave you white peas;  
Why not live sweetly, as in the green trees?

### **“Issue” Poem by Yves Arnaud**

J'étais venu par le plus court  
Par le chemin des autres jours  
Je vous attendais à l'orée  
Vous vous serez,  
Douce, égarée.

Vous reveniez de bien plus près  
Mais l'ombre est haute à la forêt  
Vous vous serez, lasse, arrêtée  
Ou n'est-ce pas même heurtée

Vos lèvres sont closes ce soir  
Et vos yeux semblent ne rien voir  
Et vous venez par la hêtrée  
Vous êtes vous,  
Douce, égarée.

### **Philosophie - Poem by Kheng-Tsin**

Une bande d'oiseaux s'est abattue sur mon pècher en fleurs  
La gelée de cette nuit n'a donc pas fait assez de ravages  
Les misérables  
Ils se poursuivent de branche en branche  
Une pluie de pétales tombent sur le gazon.

Tiens, Tiens!  
Cette neige rose  
Comme les jardin où se promènent les Immortels

Merci petits oiseaux turbulents  
Je n'aurai pas beaucoup de pêches  
Mais sur quel beau tapis je m'étendrai  
Tout à l'heure.

### **Outcome**

*I've come on the shortest path,  
by the road of other days.  
I waited for you at the edge of the woods  
You are who you are -  
sweet, lost.*

*You came even closer  
But the forest is steeped in shadow  
You stopped by the edge  
of the grove.*

*Tonight, your lips are closed.  
Your eyes seem to see nothing  
And you've come by the beech trees.  
You are who you are.  
Sweet and lost.*

### **Philosophy**

*A group of birds came crashing down  
On my peach trees, in full flower.  
As if last night's ice storm didn't do enough damage!  
Those poor birds  
Hopped from branch to branch  
And a rain of petals fell on the grass.*

*Well, well!  
This pinkpeach snow  
Must be like the garden of where the Immortals stroll.*

*Thank you, frantic little birds!  
I won't have many peaches this year  
But what a beautiful carpet I'll lay on right now.*

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### **“Atwood Songs” Poetry by Margaret Atwood**

#### **Notes Toward A Poem That Can Never Be Written**

This is the place  
You would rather not know about,  
This is the place that will inhabit you,  
This is the place you cannot imagine,  
This is the place that will finally defeat you

Where the word why shrivels and empties itself.  
This is famine.

#### **Memory**

Memory is not in the head only.  
It's midnight,  
You existed once, you exist again.  
My entire skin sensitive as an eye,  
Imprint of you glowing against me,  
Burnt out match in a dark room.

### **Eating Fire**

Eating fire is your ambition:  
To swallow the flame down  
Take it into your mouth  
And shoot it forth, a shout or  
An incandescent tongue.

A word exploding from you in gold, crimson  
Unrolling in a brilliant scroll  
To be lit up from within  
Vein by vein  
To be the sun  
(Taught by a sideshow man.)

### **Habitation**

Marriage is not a house or even a tent  
It is before that, and colder:  
The edge of the forest, the edge of the desert,  
The unpainted stairs,  
At the back where we squat  
Outside, eating popcorn  
The edge of the receding glacier  
Where painfully and with wonder  
At having survived even this far  
We are learning to make fire.

### **Four Evasions**

Sitting in this car, houses & wind outside  
Three in the morning, windows obliterated by snow  
Coats & arms around each other,  
Hands cold, no place to go

Unable to say how much I want you  
Unable even to say I am unable

Not that there is nothing to be said  
But that there is too much: this cripples me.

I watch with envy and desire,  
You speak so freely.

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### **Four songs with poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay**

#### **Even in the moment of our earliest kiss**

Even in the moment of our earliest kiss,  
When sighed the straitened bud into the flow'r,  
Sat the dry seed of most unwelcome this;  
And that I knew, though not the day and hour.

Too season wise am I, being country-bred,  
To tilt at autumn or defy the frost;  
Snuffing the chill even as my fathers did,  
I say with them, "What's out tonight is lost."

I only hope with the mild hope of all  
Who watch the leaf take shape upon the tree,  
A fairer summer and a later fall  
Than in these parts a man is apt to see,  
And sunny clusters ripened for the wine:  
I tell you this across the blackened vine.

#### **Feast**

I drank at ev'ry vine.  
The last was like the first.  
I came upon no wine  
So wonderful as thirst.

I gnawed at ev'ry root.  
I ate of ev'ry plant.  
I came upon no fruit  
So wonderful as want.

Feed the grape and the bean  
To the vintner and monger;  
I will lie down lean  
With my thirst and my hunger.

### What lips my lips have kissed

What lips my lips have kissed, and where and why,  
I have forgotten.  
And what arms have lain under my head till morning,  
But the rain is full of ghosts tonight,  
That tap and sigh upon the glass  
And listen for reply.

And in my heart, there stirs a quiet pain.  
For unremembered lads that not again  
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

Thus, in the winter stands the lonely tree,  
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,  
Yet knows it boughs more silent than before:  
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,  
I only know that summer sang in me  
A little while, that in me sings no more.

### I know my mind

I know my mind and I have made my choice;  
Not from your temper does my doom depend.  
Love me or love me not, you have no voice in this,  
That is my portion to the end.

Your presence and your favors,  
The full part you can give, you now can take away;  
What lies between your beauty and my heart,  
Not even you can trouble or betray.

Mistake me not – unto my inmost core  
I do desire your kiss upon my mouth;  
They have not craved a cup of water more  
That bleach upon the deserts of the south.

Here might you bless me,  
What you cannot do is bow me down,  
That have been loved by you.

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### Artist Bios:

For nearly forty years, 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. Since joining the faculty at UC San Diego in 2008, she has been 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 for the Performing Arts, 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 Grawemeyer Award winning composer Lei Liang, addressing gun violence in America. Co-presented by ART Power and the Department of Music at UC San Diego, *Inheritance* had its premiere performances in October, 2018. In addition, Ms. Narucki also commissioned and produced *Cuatro Corridos* (2013), a chamber opera that addresses trafficking of women across the U.S.- Mexico border. With libretto by renowned Mexican author Jorge Volpi, the opera earned critical acclaim and was performed in Los Angeles, Guadalajara, Dallas, Tijuana and Mexico City. The recording on Bridge Records earned a 2017 Latin Grammy Nomination.

Ms. Narucki was nominated for a 2019 Grammy for Best Classical Vocal Recording for *The Edge of Silence: Vocal Chamber Music of György Kurtág* (AVIE Records). The recording was included in the New York Times Best Classical Tracks of 2019 and was named a Critic's Choice of Opera News. Her most recent recording with pianist Donald Berman, *This Island* (AVIE Records) focuses on songs of women composers of the early twentieth century, many recorded for the first time.

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 serves as Chair of the Piano Faculty at the Longy School of Music of Bard College and is on the faculty of Tufts University. His principal teachers were Mildred Victor, George Barth, John Kirkpatrick, and Leonard Shure.

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