



# Grace Notes

*Newsletter of New Amsterdam Singers*

## February 2012

Jane Barry and Nate Mickelson,  
Co-editors

Join us for

### Juxtapositions

Friday, March 2  
8 p.m.

Sunday, March 4  
4 p.m.

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

**Reserve tickets today!**  
[www.nasingers.org](http://www.nasingers.org)

Carol Barnett combines the Latin Mass with new poetry and a bluegrass band, while Steven Stucky moves from an iconic Byrd motet to Whitman poetry, employing his own plangent harmony.

The program also includes works by Ešenvalds, Bruckner, Byrd and Tomás Luis de Victoria.



### Mixing It Up at the March Concerts

by Arden Rogow-Bales

You've probably noticed that Clara has named our upcoming concert "Juxtapositions". Maybe you've wondered why that is; after all, a varied repertoire has always been a hallmark of NAS performances, and, in itself, may not seem like something to name a concert after. But this set goes further than the usual combination of different genres across pieces. It's got different genres *within* pieces.

You read that right! Each of this concert's two main works combines within itself two musical personalities that usually don't come face to face. Carol Barnett's *The World Beloved* is a "bluegrass Mass", a rootsy revamp of the Latin Mass text interwoven with folksy ballads. Meanwhile, Steven Stucky's "Whispers" presents fragments of Byrd's *Ave Verum Corpus* dissolving into a shifting web of semi-tonal explorations of Walt Whitman. They're quite a pair!

## Bring NAS Home with You!

**CDs:** Our two-disc fortieth-anniversary CD, containing forty-six pieces, is a special bargain at \$20. All CDs are available through the NAS website: <http://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*, is \$59 for the hard cover, and \$39 for soft cover (plus \$7.25 for shipping and handling). The cookbook is available online: <http://www.cookingforcrowds.org>.

For more information about these great items, please contact the chorus at [info@nasingers.org](mailto:info@nasingers.org).

The Chamber Choir will accompany these with a series of smaller pieces, including the full *Ave Verum Corpus*, further motets by Byrd and his Renaissance contemporaries, and another quirky genre-blend: a leading Latvian composer's take on the familiar American hymn "Amazing Grace."

I was lucky enough to discuss these pieces with Clara last week and pick up some fascinating insights about each of them. I was surprised to discover, for example, that bluegrass is not considered a folk idiom! It is, properly speaking, an invented form, whose origin can be traced principally to one man, Bill Monroe, and his innovative blend of country, blues, old-time music, and jazz. Some typical features of bluegrass are high harmonies and the sounds of banjos and fiddles. Well, the sopranos and tenors have got those high harmonies covered — and we're bringing in a live bluegrass band to play the banjos and fiddles! Isn't that thrilling? Even just singing the piece with our rehearsal piano has been amazingly visceral. I can't imagine how alive it'll all come once the band's playing with us.

This piece, *The World Beloved*, only came out in 2008, but it's already seen many, many performances. I should add, in case you're wondering, that the text is almost entirely in English. Marisha Chamberlain, an American poet who had worked with Barnett before, adapted the Mass text and wrote the short songs that frame the larger movements. We've agreed in rehearsal that these ballads are remarkably convincing and authentic, and I can say, personally, I've found the whole adaptation very affecting. It's easy to forget what "Kyrie eleison" really means. It's quite another thing to scream, "Mercy! Mercy!"

While *The World Beloved* is electrifyingly direct, "Whispers" is all subtlety. Steven Stucky matched the traditional *Ave Verum Corpus* text about Jesus on the cross with "Whispers of Heavenly Death," Walt Whitman's meditation on the dead of the Civil War. No explicit connections are made between the two; instead, fragments of one drift unnervingly into the other, with only the subtlest hints about how they're related. It's up to the choir and the audience to sift through it and piece it all together. One place that always jumps out at me has half the choir murmuring "sanguine", "blood", from the Byrd original, while the rest of the group sings, "Ripples of unseen rivers, Tides of a current flowing, forever flowing". It's intriguing and more than a little creepy.

Clara told me that Steven Stucky's having quite a busy month! The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra is premiering his tone poem, *Silent Spring*, inspired by Rachel Carson's famous book, on February 17. He's also having works played by the Raschèr Quartet (the world's leading saxophone quartet!) and the New York Philharmonic. And all that culminates in...us! You know. No pressure.

Before I wrap things up, I'd like to say a few words about the rep we in the Chamber Chorus have been preparing. As you can imagine, it's been an absolute delight to learn our Renaissance motets; Byrd and Victoria were such masters of part-writing and text-painting, and there's really nothing that compares in terms of music that just feels good in your voice. I've been moved almost to tears every time we sing Byrd's *Civitas Sancti Tui*, on the text, 'Your holy cities have become a wilderness, [...] Jerusalem a desolation'. On the last two pages, the word "desolata" is sung over and over in falling lines as if we were crying. I go to pieces every time.

We'll also be singing Anton Bruckner's beloved motet, *Christus Factus Est*, which, coming from the musically extremely pure Renaissance pieces, always feels like a sort of chromatic safari, but is very beautiful in its own way. I think you'll also be interested to hear our arrangement of "Amazing Grace" by the Latvian composer Ēriks Ešņvalds; it's an ethereal setting with some extremely funky but surprisingly natural-sounding modulations. Just one more

curious juxtaposition in our series of genre-busters!

We in the chorus are very excited about this music, and we hope you'll come let us share it with you. I'm sure you'll find it just as stirring, intriguing, and compelling as we do.



Music Director Clara Longstreth and partner Marcos Dinnerstein tour the dance floor while singers Donna Zalichin and Robin Beckhard take a lesson!

## Extrachoricular Activities: Let's Dance!

by Nate Mickelson

Forty-plus singers and supporters gathered at the Caelum Gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood on February 9th to raise money to support the chorus and to learn the basics of Tango. The fundraising event, planned by benefit co-chairs Marcos Dinnerstein and Nate Mickelson, included live music led by former singer Guillermo Vaisman and professional-quality dancing and instruction by Anna Tavis, a colleague of board member Robin Beckhard. You can see and hear the fruits of their collaboration on Youtube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_IErfNfC-cc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IErfNfC-cc)!

The most surprising aspect of the evening for this writer was learning how hard it was to transfer the sense of rhythm I use in singing to my two left feet! (Special apologies to my partners, Clara, Robin, and Jay for any bruised toes!) My difficulties were eased only by Ms. Tavis's common sense instruction. After demonstrating her considerable talents, she started the group out simply, asking us to feel the music and walk in a circle. When we'd mastered that, she turned us around to play the partner's role. This was more of a challenge, but as the saying goes, it takes two to tango! One of the highlights of the dancing were the "ocho" turns that Ms. Tavis taught us next. The ladies made figure eights with their feet and twirled their skirts dramatically while their partners kept time as centers of gravity.

Mr. Vaisman and his keyboardist provided delightfully authentic accompaniment throughout, transforming a serious art gallery into a

charming Argentine plaza, and just the kind of public event the planners had in mind! Singer Paul Parsekian's delicious *alfajores* (dulce de leche filled shortbread cookies) added to the festival atmosphere and completed a themed menu that included empanadas, beef skewers with chimichurri sauce, and stuffed chilis in tomato sauce, plus red and white wine from Chelsea Wine Vault ([www.chelseawinevault.com](http://www.chelseawinevault.com)).

On behalf of the chorus and the board, I'd like to thank all the supporters who attended the event and contributed to its success. Throwing unique fundraisers continues to be one of the strengths of New Amsterdam Singers and an important reason we can present exciting programs like the upcoming "Juxtapositions!"

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**PO Box 373**  
**Cathedral Station**  
**New York, NY 10025**  
**[www.nasingers.org](http://www.nasingers.org)**