



Grace Notes

Newsletter of New Amsterdam Singers

November 2013

Nate Mickelson, Editor

Join us for

A Ceremony of Britten Carols, Hymns and Lullabies

New Amsterdam
Singers celebrates
Britten's Hundredth
Birthday and Honors
the Season!

**Friday, Dec. 13
8 p.m.**

**Sunday, Dec. 15
4 p.m.**

*Caroling reception
follows the Sunday
concert!*

Immanuel Lutheran
Church
122 E 88th Street



A Note from Our Music Director, Clara Longstreth

There seems to be some mysterious luck- or fate- at play when a composer happens upon a text that fires his or her imagination, resulting in a splendid work of art. Benjamin Britten was passing through Nova Scotia on his way home to England in 1942 and there found a book of medieval carols. With these in hand, he spent his time on board an ocean liner composing *A Ceremony of Carols*. Returning to England also meant a return to boy choirs, to cathedrals, to Gregorian chant, and the sound of bells. All of these are invoked in this beloved collection of nine carols for treble voices.

(at Lexington
Avenue)

**Reserve your
tickets now for \$5
off the door price:
www.nasingers.org**

Featuring Britten
favorites *A
Ceremony of Carols*
and "A Hymn to the
Virgin" and the little-
performed *AMDG*, as
well as Susa's *Carols*
and *Lullabies*, Biebl's
angelic *Ave Maria*,
and more.



Meet Andy James

Interview by Donna
Zalichin

Donna: Andy, I can tell
you are not a native
New Yorker. Where are
you from?

Andy: I'm from
Mississippi. I was born
in Greenville, which is a
town of about
40-50,000 people, and
grew up in a suburb of
Jackson. I'm a graduate
of the University of
Mississippi – Ole Miss.

Donna: And what
brought you to New

Conrad Susa was asked by the conductor Philip Brunelle to write a companion piece to Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*. While interested (and daunted), Susa did not start composing until he was given a book of Spanish carols familiar in the Southwest, which intrigued him with what he characterized as their "homely, artful simplicity." He chose ten tunes, arranged them to form a kind of narrative, and added guitar and marimba to Britten's harp. The resulting piece, written in 1992, is similar in form to the *Ceremony of Carols*, but wholly different in feeling. The Spanish and Catalan carols have dance like rhythms and seem to celebrate a more secular aspect of Christmas. Singers find them a delight.

Benjamin Britten's hundredth birthday came on November 22, 2013, and concerts focused on his music have been heard in New York City as well as in England. The NAS concerts on December 13 and 15 include not only the familiar *Ceremony of Carols*, but also a relative rarity, *AMDG*. This a cappella work was written three years before *Ceremony of Carols* but not performed until 1984, in part due to the difficulty of the music. The NAS chamber chorus will sing four of the seven movements, each on poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins, who became a Jesuit priest in his youth. The title *AMDG* refers to the Jesuit motto *Ad maiorem Dei Gloriam*.

Another interesting work is *The Song of the Women*, on a poem by Ford Madox Ford, written in the voice of working class women in England. The trio of women sing, "It's warm in the heavens, but it's cold upon the earth. And we ain't no food at table nor no fire upon the hearth. And it's bitter hard a-Christmassing, Carolling, Singin' songs about our Saviour's birth."

Our concerts include three short works for men's voices by Biebl, John Jacob Niles, and Milhaud, as well as two more by Britten. A listener will find folk songs of universal appeal, like Niles' *I Wonder as I Wander*, infectious dance rhythms, and ethereal, mystical harmonies for a cappella choir. Do come!



New Amsterdam Singers at the Cape of Good Hope in July 2013.

UP from the Bottom of the World

by Ed Schultz

Travelling to South Africa conjures up the fancy of standing on the Cape of Good

York?

Andy: Well, after college I had a job at a Presbyterian retreat center in Stony Point, NY, and ever since, New York has held a special place in my heart. After I finished seminary in Atlanta, I was lucky enough to land a job as Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Whitehouse, in Queens. This is my 9th year there.

Donna: One of the things I personally most like about NAS is the diversity of its membership. But I can't recall any other Mississippi natives, and I am pretty sure you're the only minister we've had in our membership. How did you find us?

Andy: I sang all through high school and college, but it had been quite a while since I'd been part of an organized chorus. I had a brief sabbatical in the summer of 2012, part of which I spent on Iona, an island off the coast of Scotland, and I realized during that time that one of the things missing from my life was singing. I found NAS on the Vocal Area Network [a web based resource for singers and choruses] and was attracted to it because of the broad repertoire.

Hope – upside down -- an apt metaphor for many experiences as we journeyed 17 magical days through a familiar, but at bottom (pun intended), unknown part of the world.

Sure enough, we saw the “instant townships” seen often in news photos and video -- collections of single-storey huts and hovels of corrugated iron, plywood, and whatever else could be hammered together. But surprise! Squeezed among them are equally rickety barber shops, funeral parlors, auto repair, and “tuck” shops (small retail food stores), signaling a lively if spare community life.

For a nation repressed under Apartheid for five decades, a wicked sense of humor thrives, seen in signs we passed on the road. To wit: “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” a gigantic catering hall. Another corner turned up “Jungle Tots childcare,” yet another “Arthur Ashe Tennis Courts.”

Our visit to Robben Island, the prison in which Mandela was confined for 18 years was another emotional turn-around. No one could fail to be appalled by the spare and tiny cell, and no spine would not be chilled by the fact he slept on that hard often wet floor all those years. But you find yourself smiling because you know the prisoner is free and about to celebrate his 95th birthday.

It is winter here below the equator and we travel in bright sunshine through short days; temperatures cooler down at the Cape, growing warmer as we moved north – another disconnect. This is a spacious and beautiful country, mostly flat and scrubby but with grand upshots of mountains. Outlying game preserves offered sightings of zebra, giraffe, donkey, lion, warthog, wildebeest (gnu to crossword puzzlers), elephant, and wild dog. And everywhere, colorful African arts on display (and sale).

But sing is what we came to do, and the opportunity to sing with choruses from Australia, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, Africa, and the U.S. proved to be a thrilling, visceral experience for NAS. Our audiences – mostly black Africans – embraced it all, rising to their feet to applaud, stamp and cheer loudly at the close of each set.

Exposed to such contagious energy and led by Music Director Clara, the usually staid New Amsterdam Singers couldn't help but “get down.” Music books were abandoned as the singers became one with the seductive beat of a South African hymn and Freedom song, swaying and clapping time as they sang. Clapping along, the crowd roared their appreciation filling the hall with energetic joy. You would've loved it.

Post concerts, a group of twenty NASers enjoyed quiet reflection on a Zambezi River dinner cruise, spotting crocs and hippos during cocktails, enjoying a candlelight dinner of freshly caught fish, we toasted the comradeship of the adventure. The word heard most was “magic!” What better word to describe all we did, all we learned, and all we felt on our journey to the bottom of the world.

After I joined, I right away appreciated Clara's unassuming and gentle style.

I love the people in the chorus and have made wonderful friends. Since I am a minister, I don't have a lot of non-church friends except through chorus. Where else in my world would I get to be friends with an atheist who can recite the Lord's Prayer in two languages? [That would be your humble interviewer.] I am a better and happier person since I joined NAS.

Donna: You're also on the NAS board of directors. How is that going?

Andy: I like it. I like being able to contribute to the chorus's success, and I like not being the one in charge of the meetings! But it still takes me aback because I'm so used to all the church meetings that I go to opening and closing with prayer.

Donna: I understand that in addition to your ministerial duties, you recently started a part time job at the Interchurch Center (aka the God Box).

Andy: Yes, I am the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of New York



The members of Uptown Rhythm: Nina Reiniger, Dana Crowell, Megan O'Neil, and Ellen Stark.

I Feel a Song Comin' On

by Nina Reiniger

On two recent evenings, I had the pleasure of seeing a lot of hard work pay off. Thirteen members of New Amsterdam Singers performed in a cabaret revue, organized by Mike Milton and myself, at Don't Tell Mama in the theater district to full houses of our friends and family. We wanted to give the opportunity to a number of NAS singers to take to the stage and show us what they've got – and boy, did they ever! Mike Milton acted as MC for the evening and charmed the audience with his well-honed stage presence and humor, as well as his singing. Max Blum provided a hauntingly beautiful rendition of a song from Floyd Collins about a man contemplating mortality. Elspeth Strang, who brought Eliza Doolittle to life on stage, and Jay Pott, with her soulful rendition of "Supertime," were both new to cabaret, though you would never have known it from their engaging performances. We had several new NAS members bring their talents to the stage including Charlotte Levitt, who sang a funny, quirky song entitled "Amor," and Megan O'Neil, who beautifully harmonized in the all women's quartet piece, "And So It Goes."

Performing alongside those new to cabaret were at least two individuals well accustomed to stage performance: Nathaniel Granor, whose background in musical theater direction and performance shone through in his pieces from Into the Woods and Pippin, and André Guthman, a perennial NAS favorite, who hit it out of the park with "The Best is Yet to Come." Nathaniel was later joined by Bernardica Sculac making a versatile duo who, in one song, portrayed a loving couple adoring their children and then, in another, played the ex-boyfriend and girlfriend of a



City. That's the body over all the churches in the five boroughs. So I am the record keeper and parliamentarian for the Presbytery.

Donna: Sounds like that is quite different from your congregational work.

Andy: The sermon and worship planning for Sunday services is very creative, and I really love that part of the job. So, yes, the work as the Clerk is very different. I am pretty busy!

Donna: And what do you do in the little spare time you have?

Andy: I really enjoy the Queens food world, and as a busy single person I find I eat out a lot. And I am a big fan of the NY Red Bulls soccer team. They ended the season with the best record in the league, which is a first for them. I go to as many games as I can and take friends from church and choir.

Donna: I know you have a solo on our upcoming December concert [I wonder as I wander, by John Jacob Niles]. I heard you for the first time the other night at rehearsal and thought you were fantastic. It's a beautiful piece, and you sang it beautifully! I think NAS

manipulative lover. The evening closed with the quartet, Uptown Rhythm, which included Ellen Stark, Dana & James Crowell, and me performing "Bring it Home to Me." Our accompanist for the evening was Paul Greenwood, an extremely talented performer who gave the whole evening a very professional feel. Overall, the event was a great success and I think everyone, both on stage and off, enjoyed themselves immensely.



Nathaniel Granor and Bernardica Sculac Stern performed "The Tango Maureen" from the musical Rent.



Thanks to the creativity and hard work of Dana Boocock Crowell and her band of talented elves, NAS has a newly-compiled CD of favorite NAS holiday performances, available just in time for the holidays.

"A Christmas Celebration" brings together the best NAS live concert recordings of Christmas carols over the past two decades, in a beautiful CD with color covers designed by John Duncan and photography by Hannah Kerwin. This limited edition run of 100 CDs will be offered for sale at the December concerts for \$20 each. This can be a delightful holiday memento for yourself as well as a meaningful gift for others!

Do you follow NAS on Twitter? Have you liked us on Facebook? We hope so, but if you haven't, take a moment to do so now! As holiday season nears and we prepare for our December concerts, we'll be sharing more on social media.



is lucky to have you – in many ways. Thanks for being part of our wonderful chorus.

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/NewAmsterdamSingers>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/nasingers>

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