

New Amsterdam Singers
St. Ignatius of Antioch Church
May 31, 2012

Clara Longstreth, Music Director
Max Blum, Assistant Conductor
Pen Ying Fang, Accompanist

Songs of Birds and Angels

Lark Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

André Guthman, tenor

The Caged Bird Kirke Mechem (b. 1925)

Max Blum, conductor

Die Erste Elegie Einojuhani Rautavaara (b. 1928)

Robin Beckhard, Susan Daum, Lilian Matsuda, Jennifer Trahan, sopranos

INTERMISSION

O Süsser Mai! Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Fahr Wohl!

Der Falke

(from Op. 93a)

The Lark in the Clear Air Irish traditional, arr. Paul Crabtree (b. 1960)

Shakespeare Songs, Book VI Matthew Harris (b. 1956)

When Daisies Pied

Fear no More

Where the Bee Sucks, There Suck I

New York City première

The Chamber Chorus

Skylarks Steven Stucky (b. 1949)

From To a Skylark

Haiku

Kate Leahy, Azadeh Hadim, Lilian Matsuda, sopranos

From Split the Lark

From An Alphabet

From In Flanders' Fields

From Hark, hark the Lark

New York City première

PROGRAM NOTES

What is it about the family *alilaudiae*? Why have writers from Pliny, Aristotle, and Albertus Magnus on through the Romantic poets been moved by the lark family, especially the British and European skylark?

I encountered a lark only once, on a hillside in England 45 years ago. It was memorable. The little bird flew straight up, pouring forth a liquid, melodious song. Soon he was out of sight.

The Birdwatcher's Pocket Guide of 1990, published in London, confirms my memory:
In its musical song flight, bird takes off from ground, climbs vertically to great height, where it "hangs" before spiraling down with a final plunge to the ground... Call is a rolling chirrup, constantly uttered by flying birds. Melodious, bubbling song is uttered from perch as well as on wing.

To balance this pretty, romantic view of the lark, we should remember that (especially in Europe) man has appreciated larks for more than their song – they have also been hunted and eaten.

Today's program focuses on poetry about the lark, with excursions to visit the cuckoo, the falcon, the owl, the bat, and the generic bird, as well as to another symbolic figure with wings – the angel. The music is *a cappella*, and, with the exception of the Brahms and the Copland, all written in the last twenty years. Two works receive their New York City premières.

We begin with Aaron Copland's *Lark*, written in 1938 at the MacDowell Colony. Copland was born in Brooklyn in 1900. Although his parents had emigrated from the Polish and Lithuanian provinces of Russia, Copland's music came to represent a quintessentially American sound. Copland studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger for four years and immersed himself in the international world of music, eventually deciding that he wanted to sound as unmistakably American as Mussorgsky or the Stravinsky of the 1920s sounded Russian. Back in America, Copland became a distinguished educator and conductor as well as composer, and was especially generous in helping young composers. He wrote for orchestras, chamber groups, dance and film, and – happily – a small quantity of fine choral music. In 1980, the New Amsterdam Singers serenaded the composer in an all-Copland concert in celebration of his 80th birthday.

Copland's *Lark* is a classic of the choral repertoire. Voices enter singly, as if tentatively, rising as the lark does when it sings. The solo singer has the role of herald of daybreak. Syncopation and uneven meters lend nervous energy to the middle section. The work ends on an astonished "Ah!", as if the viewer had suddenly witnessed the sunrise.

Insert Copland text

In 1998 Kirke Mechem wrote a choral cycle, *Winging Wildly*, the fruit of a three-way commission. NAS first performed it in 2001. The middle movement, *The Caged Bird*, uses a text by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Born in 1872, dead in 1905 at the age of 33, he was the first African-American poet to gain national recognition. The son of former slaves, he was inspired by his mother's love of poetry, and rose to important positions in his Ohio high school where he

was the only black student in his class. His work often dealt with difficulties blacks experienced trying to achieve equality in America.

Kirke Mechem has a catalogue of more than 250 compositions. He enjoys an international presence, as ASCAP recently registered concert performances of his music in 42 countries. Born and raised in Kansas and educated at Stanford and Harvard, Mechem conducted and taught at Stanford, and served as composer-in-residence for several years at the University of San Francisco. Mechem's compositions cover almost every genre, but vocal music is the core of his work. His three-act opera, *Tartuffe*, has been staged more than 350 times, and has been performed in six countries. *Song of the Slaves* – a suite for bass-baritone, soprano, chorus, and orchestra from his opera *John Brown* – has toured over 40 U.S. cities. His extensive choral works have garnered him the title of “dean of American choral composers.”

Insert Mechem text

Einojuhani Rautavaara is the most prominent Finnish composer since Sibelius. After early studies in Helsinki, he came to New York City to study at the Juilliard School with Persichetti, and at Tanglewood with Copland and Sessions. He first came to international attention when he won a composition prize in 1954.

Since then he has written eight symphonies, several concerti, choral works, sonatas, string quartets, and operas. He has had many works recorded, and won a Grammy for his seventh symphony, *Angel of Light*.

Rautavaara experimented with serial techniques early in his career, but abandoned them in the 1960s. His later works often have a mystical element. He wrote his own program note in the score of the work we sing today, *Die Erste Elegie*, on the first elegy of Rainer Maria Rilke.

My youthful encounter with the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke turned out to be quite a discovery, not only in literary terms but also for the development of my world view. I still associate it strongly with the mysticism surrounding the ruins of post-war Vienna. It was there that I composed my Fünf Sonette an Orpheus, and two years later in Cologne I started writing the song cycle Die Liebenden to Rilke's texts. From that time onward I continued to carry with me – both mentally and in my suitcase – the Duino Elegies, Rilke's seminal work. Over the years I would take it out, finding myself particularly drawn to the first elegy, whose angel figure took on the role of a personal “animus”. My orchestral works Angels and Visitations, Angel of Dusk, and Playgrounds for Angels are all musical personifications of this figure.

Only as recently as 1993, however, when the international choral body “Europa Cantat” wanted to commission a large-scale choral work from me, did I feel that the time had come to set an angel elegy. It had evidently matured in my subconscious in the interim, since the process of composing the work was swift, eager, and fluently self-assured. The basic pitch material is derived from four triads which together form a twelve-note row. The way this material is applied, however, stands in considerable contrast to methods usually used for atonal music. In consequence, the tone of the work is mellow even in its most dramatic: poetic, yet expressive.

Einojuhani Rautavaara
Translation Andrew Bentley

Born in Prague in 1875, Rilke lived and studied there, then in Germany, then in Paris, and then travelled extensively in Europe, often the guest of aristocrats and socialites. Rilke's poetry is mysterious, visionary, and hard to understand. The *Duino Elegies* have been translated at least fourteen times.

Rautavaara refers to his own fascination with Rilke's Angel. This angel is not a Christian angel, but more like an angel in Islam. It is a mythical being who has transformed itself from visible to invisible, and has attained a state of perfect consciousness, thus transcending human nature. To Rilke the Angel is both inspiration and rebuke, both consolation and terror (because the human cannot attain the Angel's state).

The first elegy came to Rilke as a romantic visitation. Rilke was staying alone at a castle in Trieste, Schloss Duino, and one day ventured out to walk in a terrible storm.. As he walked through the roaring wind and rain, gazing down on waves crashing on the rocks 200 feet below, he heard a voice calling, "Wer, wern ich schrie, wer hörte mich denn", the first lines of the first elegy.

He returned to his (borrowed) castle and wrote the first elegy in 24 hours. He did not finish the set of ten elegies for ten years. The first elegy ends on a hopeful note, as Rilke summons the power of music to support man.

Insert Rautavaara text

The Chamber Chorus brings us back to poetry on birds. Johannes Brahms wrote his *Lieder und Romanzen* in 1883, on a variety of folk songs and poems. We sing three of the six: *O Süsser mai*, about the poet's inability to enjoy springtime (and its birdsong), wishing he were free (from unrequited love, probably); *Fahr Wohl*, a farewell to birds, leaves, and loves; and *Der Falke*, an odd Serbian tale of a falcon in love with a raven-haired maiden. At Brahms' funeral service, *Fahr Wohl* was sung by the Singverein chorus he had once conducted.

Insert Brahms text & translation

Paul Crabtree is an English composer who has lived in America for many years. He has managed to mingle classical and popular culture to an unusual degree, winning many awards and commissions in the process. Today we sing his arrangement of an Irish tune, *The Lark in the Clear Air*, from his set, *Five Bird Songs*.

Insert Crabtree text

Matthew Harris has had orchestral works performed by the Minnesota, Houston, Florida, Jacksonville, Chattanooga, Spokane and Modesto symphony orchestras; chamber works by the Lark Quartet, New York New Music Ensemble and League-ISCM; and vocal works by Sheryl Studer and Faith Esham.

The New York City Opera presented scenes from Matthew Harris' opera *Tess* on their American Composers Showcase series. *Three Arias from Tess* was premiered by the Lake George Opera Festival, and *Three Choruses from Tess* was premiered at Carnegie Hall.

Mr. Harris' highly popular choral works have been commissioned or premiered by leading choruses such as the Dale Warland Singers, Phoenix Bach Choir, Los Angeles Chamber Singers, Western Wind, and Cantori New York, and sung by countless school and community choirs across America.

The music of Matthew Harris is familiar to NAS audiences. We have programmed many of his *Shakespeare Songs*, and were the first chorus to record them. They have since been recorded by three professional choirs. Today's performance of his *Book VI* is the first New York City performance of the new set, written in 2009. Harris wrote of this set:

My Shakespeare Songs are settings of the lyrics for songs in Shakespeare's plays. When Daisies Pied has sweet, pastoral music that turns raucous and bluesy when we find out the portent of the bird's song. Fear no More is an elegy which describes death so soothingly that it almost becomes a lullaby. I end with the sprightly Where the Bee Sucks, there Suck I, a song for Ariel in the Tempest when he's set free.

Insert Harris texts

Winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for his *Second Concerto for Orchestra*, Steven Stucky is widely recognized as one of the leading American composers of his generation. As influences on his own musical sensibility, Stucky acknowledges several of the great figures of twentieth-century music, chief among them Debussy, Stravinsky, Ravel, Bartók, and Ligeti. His music is recorded on seven labels.

In recent years Mr. Stucky has received commissions from the BBC Proms, Chanticleer, the Pennsylvania Wind Quintet, Boston Musica Viva, and the Minnesota, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, and St. Louis symphony orchestras. He has written solo works for many distinguished artists, including Evelyn Glennie, and has been commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, NEA, Meet the Composer, and the Institute of American Music. In September 1990 his orchestral work, *Angelus*, opened Carnegie Hall's Centennial Season celebration.

In addition to composing, Mr. Stucky is active as a conductor, writer, lecturer, and teacher. He is a frequent guest composer on college campuses. He won the ASCAP Deems Taylor Prize for his 1981 book, *Lutoslawski and His Music*. Among his other honors are fellowships from the NEA, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since 1980 he has been on the faculty of Cornell University, where at present he is Given Foundation Professor of Composition and Artistic Director of Ensemble X, a professional chamber ensemble specializing in new music. Since 1988 he has been associated with the Los Angeles Philharmonic as composer-in-residence, new music advisor, and consulting composer. In February 2012 Mr. Stucky had a performance of his chamber music at Symphony Space, as well as three performances of his *Son et Lumière* with the New York Philharmonic under Alan Gilbert. Also in February, his *Silent Spring* was performed in New York by the Pittsburgh Symphony, for which he is composer of the year.

Skylarks was written in 2001 for the Kansas City Chorale, and receives its NYC première today. Stucky has chosen six varied texts, each involving the lark, and uses a four-voice choir augmented by a small group of sopranos and altos as a contrasting group. For the first

movement, he chose the first stanza only from the long poem, *To a Skylark* by Shelley, a well-known nineteenth century poet.

Insert To a Skylark text

Here the chorus sings the very short text while three soprano soloists invoke the lark's song in wordless counterpoint.

Insert Haiku text

Emily Dickinson's enigmatic *Split the Lark* comes next. One interpretation of the poem, by scholar Jo Small, is that the poet identifies with the lark. "This poem is essentially a satiric reproach to one who demands certainty and is stupidly insensitive to sublimity, turning logical analysis into murderous dissection."

Insert Split the Lark text

The 19th century poet Edward Lear comes next with *An Alphabet*. And here Stucky has created his own poem on the lark, very much modeled on Lear's set, and as charmingly silly and childlike as Lear's own.

Insert Alphabet text

The poetry and music take a sharp turn with the famous poem by John McCrae, *In Flanders' Fields*. McCrae was a Canadian soldier, physician, and poet who served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in World War I. He fought in the second battle of Ypres in the Flanders region of Belgium where the German army launched one of the first chemical attacks in the history of war. A close friend of McCrae's was killed during a battle, and McCrae performed the burial service himself. The next day he composed the poem while sitting in the back of an ambulance. Stucky sets the first of three stanzas. The poem and the poppy are prominent Remembrance Day symbols throughout Canada, and the poem one of Canada's best known literary works.

Insert In Flanders Fields text

The set ends with Shakespeare's famous, jubilant poem from the play *Cymbeline* – *Hark, hark the Lark*, invoking the mythical god Phoebus, the god of light.

Insert Cymbeline text

Notes by Clara Longstreth©