

Wednesdays@7 presents

# Back and Forth

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

Wednesday, May 17, 2023 - 7:00 p.m.  
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

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Scott Wheeler                      *Wasting the Night* (1990)                      Edna St. Vincent Millay

Thursday  
Recuerdo  
I shall forget you  
Time does not bring relief  
The Betrothal

Samuel Barber                      *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1947)                      James Agee

(A brief intermission)

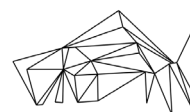
Alex Taylor                      *Agee Songs*\* (2023)                      James Agee

The father of families  
The noise of the locust  
But the men by now

Tania Leon                      *Atwood Songs* (2018)                      Margaret Atwood

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

\* world premiere



## Program Notes:

### Back and Forth

The first singer who I remember hearing was my father, John. He had a beautiful baritone voice, and serenaded us regularly in the car, crooning ballads of Nat King Cole and cowboy songs of Hank Williams. I was raised in a town that had seen better days, with mills and factories alongside a river, rows of modest houses with porches and pots of geraniums. I always thought it was beautiful.

Samuel Barber's *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*, evokes memories of a simpler place and time. The America of Agee's prose poem is almost a century old, and the days of clanging streetcars has passed; yet the imagery of families grouped together on a summer night, seen through the eyes of a child, is timeless. I am grateful to have a chance to present Alex Taylor's wonderful songs which illuminate other portions of Agee's work in settings that are spacious and gleaming.

The other two of the sets of songs on tonight's program focus on the complexity of relationships, in all their forms. Scott Wheeler's succinct and playful settings of Edna St. Vincent Millay's songs are miracles of understatement, incorporating the poet's acerbic wit and unflinching perspective on love and loss. Tania Leon's *Atwood Songs* are jazzy, angular and rhythmically vibrant musical framings of the equally uncompromising feminist poetry of the well-known Canadian writer.

I followed the breadcrumb trail of poetry and music to a life far from that town alongside the river. But we take who we are with us, wherever we go - back and forth, and forth and back again.

- Susan Narucki

### Agee Songs (2023)

James Agee's fantasia-like *Knoxville, Summer of 1915* was published posthumously as a prologue to his novel *A Death in the Family*. Drawing on memories of childhood just before the death of his father, Agee takes the reader back to the porches and lawns, the smells and sounds and familial dynamics of a lower-middle-class neighborhood in the early twentieth century.

Samuel Barber's famous setting of *Knoxville* used only selections – about one-third – of Agee's text; here my *Agee Songs* takes a second pass at that original source material, scavenging what Barber left behind – a remainder rich with metaphor and nostalgia.

I was particularly drawn to Agee's sensitive but hazy rendering of his own and other's fathers: they are "nearly anonymous", "ghostlike", "fishlike pale", their faces exhibiting a "sober mystery", as if behind glass, quietly embedded with the mundane but ethereal task of hosing their lawns. To me Agee's text has the quality of a reverie, ecstatic in the sense of being outside of itself, trance-like; and at the center of it these recurring images of mysterious, distant, paternal ghosts.

At one level these songs respond directly to Agee's text: creating a musical space that plays with transparency and opacity, a vessel for the words and memories to speak. But they also respond to Barber's intense and heartfelt embodiment of that text: creating a musical language that is in dialogue with his idiosyncratic harmonies, his deceptively simple lyricism, his clever evocations of musical pasts.

I would like to thank the wonderful Susan Narucki for commissioning this work, and for all of her substantial support of my music throughout my time here at UC San Diego.

- Alex Taylor

## 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.

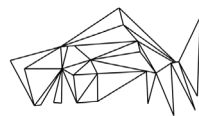
A 2011 Radcliffe Institute Fellow, Berman is currently President of The Charles Ives Society. He serves as Chair of the Piano Faculty at the Longy School of Music of Bard College and is on the faculty of Tufts University. His principal teachers were Mildred Victor, George Barth, John Kirkpatrick, and Leonard Shure.

## Alex Taylor, composer



**Alex Taylor** (b. 1988) has been commissioned and performed by prominent artists in his native New Zealand and abroad, including Orchestra Wellington (NZ), Enso Quartet (US), Ensemble U (EE), Ensemble Proton Bern (CH) and the Tanglewood Music Center (US). After studying English Literature and Music, he completed a Masters in Composition with First Class Honours under the supervision of Eve de Castro-Robinson and John Elmsly in 2011, and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California San Diego, studying with Lei Liang. Alex's compositional work often explores interactions between seemingly disparate materials, especially between old and new musics. As well as composing, he is also a multi-instrumentalist, writer and music educator. His violin-piano duo *Three Endings* is featured on Sarah Watkins and Andrew Beer's

2019 Rattle release *11 Frames*. A new work for theorbo, violin and cello, *on what grounds*, will be touring in eleven towns in New Zealand throughout April and May 2023.



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Concert Hall chimes composed by: Caroline Louise Miller