

**“unforgettable”**

Niels Swinkels for San Francisco Classical Voice, reviewing San Francisco Choral Artists’ December 2014 performances

# SAN FRANCISCO CHORAL ARTISTS

Magen Solomon, Artistic Director

presents

## ***Wisdom, Wit, & Wonder***

**Saturday March 21, 2015, 8:00 pm**

St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, 600 Colorado Ave, Palo Alto 94306

**Saturday March 28, 2015, 8:00 pm**

St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, 1111 O’Farrell Street, San Francisco 94109

**Sunday March 29, 2015, 4:00 pm**

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, 114 Montecito Avenue, Oakland 94610

**TICKETS:** \$30 at the door; discounts for advance purchase, seniors, and students.

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**San Francisco, February 25, 2015**—Award-winning, 24-voice San Francisco Choral Artists presents “Wisdom, Wit, & Wonder,” a selection of compositions based on extraordinary texts. The concerts feature well-known pieces by Conrad Susa and two world premieres by Daniel Afonso and Wayne Eastwood. Also on the program: Renaissance music by Handl, Lechner, and Lassus, and works by 21<sup>st</sup> century composers William Harris, Timothy Kramer, Christopher Marshall, Paul Ayres, and others. These performances mark two anniversaries: SFCA’s own 30<sup>th</sup>, and Magen Solomon’s 20<sup>th</sup> as Artistic Director.

For all those 20 years, Solomon’s programming has featured her signature grouping of compositions by theme, whether based on subject, text source, melody, emotional content, or story line. In the March 2015 program, the pieces are grouped around the themes “Anonymous Wisdom,” “Faith,” “Love,” “From Poets,” “From the Ancients,” and “The Last Word.” (see page 5 for a detailed listing).

**The set on “Poets” features three pieces from Conrad Susa’s “Landscapes and Silly Songs,” based on poems by Garcia Lorca.** Magen Solomon says: “Susa was a brilliant composer, and one of the most interesting people I’ve ever met. From this collection, ‘Landscape II’ is my favorite, one of the finest works for chamber choir from the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. It has a spectacular range of colors and textures, the harmonies are beautiful, and the music undulates in a unique way. His nuanced text setting is extraordinary: For 'The field of olive trees open and folds like a fan,' the music also opens and folds. For 'the grey air curls,' the music swirls and curls. For 'The olive trees are charged with shouts' the voices race to a huge crescendo and then suddenly vanish, fading into the distance."

When SFCA performed this piece in the 90s, they sang from Susa's manuscript—as was customary at the time, before computer-generated files became the norm. In this case however, it was written with an italic pen. Natalie Churchill, one of the singers at the time, remembers: "His flowing italic pen writing added to the emotional content of the work: the score undulated visually like the music and the story of the text."

**The "Love" section of the program features Daniel Afonso's "Morena Faceira,"** a fun and very Brazilian piece, complete with body percussion, finger snapping, and clapping. Afonso, this season's Composer-in-Residence, says about this world premiere: "*Morena Faceira* is based on two different folk songs from the state of São Paulo, in Southeastern Brazil. They are documented in an anthology of Brazilian folk music from 1946. I used the texts of both songs for this piece. 'Morena Faceira,' the first text, simply describes a beautiful and charming brunette woman. The second text, originally titled *Chiquinha*, are the words from a boy who is asking a brunette ('*Chiquinha*') for a kiss—and he promises her that no one will see it! My idea here was to portray that initial spark we feel when we first fall in love/lust with someone. That combination of excitement, curiosity, enthusiasm, joy, and stupidity! The opening 'fanfare' (with body percussion as 'drums') sets the overall character of the piece: fun, syncopated, and bouncy."

**William H. Harris shows sacred love in "Faire is the Heaven,"** a double-choir work, set to several stanzas by 16th century poet Edmund Spenser. Magen Solomon says: "This is a very richly scored piece, romantic, lush, and harmonically sinuous. It has a wonderful sense of motion as the two choirs "talk" to each other. Although well known in the UK, it is rarely heard here."

**Composer-Not-in-Residence Wayne Eastwood explores faith in his world premiere "A Garden Among the Flames,"** based on a poem by the 13th century Islamic poet Ibn 'Arabi. A virtuosic piece, it at times sounds like a multi-layered Renaissance motet, with different rhythmic meters occurring simultaneously in different voices. Eastwood says: "Born into the Moorish culture of Andalusian Spain, Ibn 'Arabi's works reflect the extraordinary cross-fertilization of Jewish, Islamic, and Christian philosophies found there. I have had Ibn 'Arabi in my sights for some time, and this 'Wisdom, Wit and Wonder' theme seemed an appropriate opportunity to see what I might present of his amazing views. The poet's proposition that Love succors all religious thought, surely

radical even by thirteenth-century standards, sounds nowhere more dissonant, yet nowhere more prescient and profound, than in our own discordant, polarized time."

**Faith is expressed in a Christian context in another favorite piece of Magen and the Choral Artists: "A Voice from Heaven" by Florida-based New Zealand composer Christopher Marshall** (SFCA's Composer-Not-in-Residence in 2010). Marshall based his work on a text by Hildegard von Bingen:

Lo, in the forty-third year of my earthly journey  
as I saw a heavenly vision with great fear and trembling effort  
I beheld a very great splendor in which a voice came from the heaven and said to me:  
O fragile human, and ash of ashes, and decay of decays,  
Say and write what you see and hear.

Solomon says: "Marshall employs a wide variety of textures to "open out" the text: single melodies over sustained chords, fast-moving canons, homophonic chorales. It is particularly moving to hear the words of a woman in the 12<sup>th</sup> century speak to us across 900 years, expressing what many would consider a very modern thought. That is wisdom!"

**Timothy Kramer's "At toi Atrem" and "Pabhassara Sutta" feature in the "From the Ancients" part of the program.**

Magen Solomon says: "Scott MacPherson, former director of the Trinity University Choir in San Antonio, and I went to grad school together. I learned about these very cool pieces from Scott through one of his singers, who came to sing with SFCA last year. 'At toi Atrem'—set to excerpts from Zoroastrian Scriptures—is intense and fiery, with a very calm, sustained, prayerful, and mostly homophonic middle section. The other piece, 'Pabhassara Sutta'—set to a Buddhist text in Sanscrit—invokes temple bells, and has a repeated refrain where the voices run up into a big chord and then hold that." Both pieces are from Kramer's "Lux Caelestis" set from 2011. The works in this set (all in original languages) address the subject of light from different religious perspectives.

**About Magen Solomon and 20 years as SFCA's Artistic Director:**

Magen Solomon was hired in 1994, conducted two concerts with as many as five other composers the fall of that year, and programmed her first "own" concert in March 1995. More than 200 world premieres later—by six Composers-Not-in-Residence, 17 Composers-in-Residence, 20 New Voices Project winners (composers under the age of 30), and many other composers who submitted work, she is thrilled that SFCA is still a strong supporter of living composers, both local and international, and increasingly active in supporting the creation of new choral music.

Solomon's programs are unabashedly eclectic and unusual, and they always include a few pieces even the most well-rounded choral musician has never heard. She tries to find and perform wonderful pieces that may never receive commercial publication, and combines them with overlooked works from other generations, countries, and genres--in addition to the masterpieces of the choral literature."

Maggee VanSpeybroeck, reviewing the March 2013 program "Voices of Women" for *San Francisco Classical Voice*, says:

"A performance by S.F. Choral Artists exemplifies contemporary choral music at its best. And Solomon's feel for programming is superb, so if this is her 'wild' side, I hope she keeps listening to her feral instincts."

Niels Swinkels, reviewing the December 2014 program "Postcards from abroad" for *San Francisco Classical Voice*, says:

"Magen Solomon [...] introduces each set with a short talk, and her spoken program notes are chock-full of interesting facts, details and amusing anecdotes about the music and the composers, many of whom she met or personally knows. In her lively and erudite presentations, she draws attention to the structure or texture of the music, and points out little markers that enhance the understanding and appreciation of the program."

"The choral sound of the SFCA is equally versatile and always in perfect balance ... Magen Solomon ... has an extraordinary rapport with her choristers; conductor and singers must have worked very hard in preparation for these 'Postcards' concerts, but the performances don't seem like 'work' at all; the music just flows naturally and effortlessly.

Singer Bill Boyd, a member of the ensemble at the time Magen was hired, and singing in this March 2015 program as well, remembers about first working with Magen in 1994:

"I was very impressed by her large view of the music. She emphasized the importance of the singers' understanding and feeling of the philosophical weight of the text and how that was embodied in the shapes and rhythms of the music."

For a biography of Magen Solomon, please visit <http://www.sfca.org/about-san-francisco-choral-artists/magen-solomon-artistic-director/>

For a peek into how Magen Solomon programs, please visit <http://www.sfca.org/where-do-you-find-all-this-stuff/>

**Wisdom, Wit, and Wonder program:**

**Anonymous Wisdom**

Orlandus Lassus  
Fred Squatrito

*Deus qui bonum vinum*  
*Bright Morning Star*

**Faith**

Leonhard Lechner  
Wayne Eastwood

*Deutsche Sprüche (1,3,9,13,15)*  
*A Garden among the Flames (world premiere)*

Christopher Marshall

*A Voice from Heaven*

**Love**

William Harris  
Jacob Handl  
Daniel Afonso

*Faire is the Heaven*  
*Nescio quid sit amor*  
*Morena faceira (world premiere)*

\*\*\*INTERMISSION \*\*\*

**From Poets**

Robert Starer  
Conrad Susa

*it is an easy thing*  
*From Landscapes & Silly Songs:*  
*2. The Gallant One*  
*3. The Kings of the Deck*  
*4. Landscape II*

**From the Ancients**

Timothy Kramer  
Paul Ayres  
Timothy Kramer

*At toi Atrem*  
*Arriston men hudor*  
*Pabhassara Sutta*

**The Last Word**

Robert Beckhard

*Six Epitaphs (1,2,5,6)*

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