

Women's Sacred Music Project Newsletter

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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

Dr. Virginia Kaib Ratigan, WSMP President

Dear Friends,

At this writing there is so much to share with you! First, our 25th Anniversary Concert, *Lydia's Giving*, was held at Daylesford Abbey on Sunday, November 7th. By all accounts it was a great success! Our Executive Director, Ted Latham, was able to gather the talents of Cynthia Folio, renowned composer, Kun-Yang Lin, world famous choreographer, and award-winning poet, Susan Albertine—all from Temple University. Their study of the Lydia text from the New Testament scriptures produced a stunning composition filled with passion and an understanding of the times and her story. Ted's gathering of directors, musicians, soloists, choral ensemble, and narrator resulted in an unforgettable piece.

The beautiful performance of other commissioned pieces by Anne Niekirk from Norfolk University as well as the premiere of our first two Young Women's Composers Camp (YWCC) prize winners, Sarah Kitten and Audrey Wu, made the concert a perfect offering! There is an important note to share about our commitment to the YWCC Commission Prize: Ted reported that one of our young composers told him that, had it not been for the commission challenge, she most likely would not have composed a piece of sacred music.

Kudos to you, Dr. Ted Latham, for the time, talent, and passion that you brought to this tribute to our founder, Lisa Neufeld Thomas, and to all of us as well. She called this concert "inspiring and beautiful." For many years Lisa had wanted to do a commission on Lydia and now that dream has come true. There were well over one hundred people in attendance and the comments were full of praise and thanks. The recording is available on [YouTube](#) on the Daylesford Abbey website.

On a sad note, one of our former Board members and past president of Rosemont College, Dr. Margaret Healy (Peg) died on Nov. 11th of brain cancer at Dunwoody Village rehab in Newtown Square, PA. Peg opened the doors of Rosemont for Board Meetings, the chapel for concerts and the recording of our second CD "Magdalene and the Other Mary," and the library for creating a WSMP archive. Peg served on

the WSMP Board from 2008 to 2016. Along with Bishop Allen Bartlett and a team of volunteers, she was a key organizer for the fundraiser in 2015 that has made the commission of new women's sacred music possible. We are deeply grateful for Peg's wisdom, vision, and generosity. May she Rest In Peace!

On a personal note, at our October 7th WSMP Board Meeting I announced my resignation as president of the Board. My service will be completed as a new candidate for president is recommended and elected at the Annual Meeting of the Board in May. At the resignation/retirement of Lisa Neufeld Thomas I agreed to serve for a year and that has extended to three during this historic pandemic. These have been challenging years and, in many ways, productive years. The most important decision of the Board was to create a position for an Executive Director and we were graced to bring Ted Latham to this position as Lisa was retiring. I will say without qualification that I could not have "held the fort" through these years without Ted's talents, experience and administrative skills—our virtual meetings and the amazing farewell to Lisa with the virtual premiere of our first YWCC commission anthem by Sarah Kitten was enjoyed by so many. Lisa lent support and wisdom, and our Executive Committee continued their responsibilities with creativity—giving their time generously. For example, the addition of an impressive Advisory Board is now in place. Allen Bartlett has given his gentle guidance and knowledge of our history and by-laws all along the way. Our whole Board has taken on the challenge of networking, expanding social media, and continuing to generate ideas. Deep thanks to all.

We stand now on a bridge to the future. We will celebrate the 20th anniversary of our hymnal, *Voices Found*, this coming year. How should our hymnal look in the next years? What are the needs of our worshipping communities and how are we to respond? How will our commissions continue to nurture our efforts to encourage and offer compositions by women "at the highest level of excellence"? And how do we continue to inspire young women composers to get involved? We are open and committed to new possibilities, guided by the Spirit!

With thanks to all,
Jenny



FROM THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

Dr. Ted Latham, WSMP Executive Director

Warm holiday greetings from Philadelphia, where the winter concert season is in full swing, ensembles are slowly rebuilding their audiences, and individuals and institutions are gradually recovering from the trauma of the past two years. I hope you and yours are well.

The “COVID era” has certainly been a busy time for the WSMP! Like organizations the world over, when the pandemic hit in March 2020 and we were forced to quarantine, we had to shift our operations online (<http://womenssacredmusicproject.org/>). Earlier that year, we had established a new commission series in collaboration with the Young Women Composers Camp (<http://youngwomencomposers.org>), founded at Temple University’s Boyer College of Music and Dance by my former student Erin Busch (<http://erinbusch.com>). Founded in 2018, the YWCC is a summer program for high school students that aims to “amplify the voices of young female or nonbinary composers” and WSMP President Jenny Ratigan and I were delighted to further that mission by proposing an annual \$500 commission for YWCC alumnae to the Board of Directors that was enthusiastically accepted. In May 2020, we premiered our first commission, University of Oregon composer Sarah Kitten’s beautiful choral setting of Jean Wiebe Janzen’s hymn “I Cannot Dance, O Love,” after the 13th-century poet Mechthild of Magdeburg—the only text in our 2003 *Voices Found* hymnal without an accessible setting. Like the performances of all choirs that year, our premiere was a virtual one, involving recordings stitched together from singers around the country, including members of the Charlotte (NC) Virtual Choir Consortium under the direction of David Tang. The performance, available on [YouTube](#), was hosted by Rosemont College and featured [pre-concert remarks](#) by WSMP Founding President Lisa Neufeld Thomas, Rosemont College President Sharon L. Hirsh, Jenny Ratigan, Erin Busch, and Sarah Kitten. Rosemont College President-Elect Jayson Boyers also joined the Zoom call and led the question-and-answer session afterward.

In Fall 2020, the connection I made with President Boyers during the commission premiere led to the establishment of a new podcast called “The Music That Makes Us,” part of Rosemont’s “The POWER of small” series, in which he, Director of Alumni Relations Joe Darrah, and I hold wide-ranging conversations about music, its impact on our lives, and its role at Rosemont College (<https://www.rosemont.edu/about/publications/podcast/ted-latham.php>). At the same time, the WSMP was strengthening its relationship with Rosemont, our host institution, by establishing the Lisa Neufeld Thomas Archive at the Kistler Memorial Library, where the WSMP’s materials will be permanently stored. We also renewed our association with Daylesford Abbey in Paoli, PA (<https://daylesford.org/>), the East Coast home of the Norbertine (Premonstratensian) confrères, who are celebrating their 900th anniversary this year. Having worked with Fr. Andrew Ciferni at Daylesford since 2010, when the Abbey hosted the WSMP’s premiere of Dr. Anne Neikirk’s setting of Hildegard of Bingen’s “O leafy branch,” I was delighted to renew this connection and accept Spirituality Center Director Andrew del Rossi’s invitation for Jenny and I to sit down to record an episode about the WSMP and Daylesford for their podcast series, AbbeyCast (<https://daylesford.org/springhouse-media/abbeycast/>).

2021 brought new hope for an end to the pandemic, along with a host of changes at the WSMP. Longtime Board members Amanda Smoot, John French, and David Serkin Ludwig (who has since become Dean and Director of the Music Division at the Juilliard School) stepped down, and we welcomed four new Board members: Rosa Abrahams, Lyn Loewi, Clair Rozier, and Tonya Taylor-Dorsey, who joined 2020 appointees Julia Alford and Lisa Willson DeNolfo. The Board is currently 70% female, including two BIPOC members, and represents five religious denominations. Vice-President Tom Lloyd was also instrumental in creating an Advisory Board, and we now count both Amanda and David among its nine members. As we continue to meet via Zoom, the newly composed Board of Directors has been very active, renewing and expanding our YWCC Commission to include two \$250 runner-up prizes, applying for grant support for our larger semi-annual commissions, establishing this newsletter, promoting the adoption of the *Voices Found* hymnal, and partnering with other organizations to amplify the voices of women composers, among other activities.

Since our 25th anniversary celebration was delayed by the pandemic, we decided to pull out all the stops for our gala concert honoring Lisa Thomas, which took place last month. We offered twin \$2,500 commissions to composer Cynthia Folio and choreographer Kun-Yang Lin, with an additional \$5,000 dedicated to the performance, which featured more than two dozen Boyer College doctoral students, faculty, alumni, and friends (<https://youtu.be/wDUFpLgIN58>).



Although Folio and Lin's "Lydia's Giving," a 20-minute choreographed chamber work for solo dancer, soprano, narrator, choir, and ensemble inspired by Lisa, was the linchpin of the concert, the program also featured a delayed 10th anniversary performance of "O leafy branch," commissioned by the WSMP for the Abbey, the live in-person premiere of "I Cannot Dance, O Love," and the world premieres of Anne Neikirk's Augustinian choral mini-cycle "The Soul's Beauty" (commissioned by St. Thomas of Villanova Parish) and 2021 YWCC Commission winner Audrey Wu's "The Earth Melts." This was truly a special event, one that would not have been possible without the previous WSMP fundraising efforts of recently deceased Rosemont College President Emeritus Peg Healey, whose funeral will be held at the College next week. Rest in Peace, Peg—we at the WSMP are so grateful for all you did for us and for Rosemont!

CONCERT REVIEW

The Women's Sacred Music Project 25th Anniversary Gala Concert Highlights Four Extraordinary Women Composers

Lisa Willson DeNolfo, WSMP Board Member

On a clear autumn Sunday afternoon, November 7, 2021, I had the great pleasure of attending the **The Women's Sacred Music Project's 25th Anniversary Gala Concert** which was performed at Daylesford Abbey. This was the first time I experienced the magnificent abbey, and it proved to serve gloriously as a wonderful venue for the four world premieres by four extraordinary female composers.

The afternoon's concert began with a warm welcome by WSMP Executive Director and head of the 25th Anniversary Gala Concert, Dr. Ted Latham, and President, Dr. Virginia Ratigan, who gave a brief history of WSMP and explained the organization's mission to "bring women's sacred music out of the shadows and into the light."

The opening piece, "O Leafy Branch" written by **Dr. Anne Neikirk** of Norfolk State University with text by St. Hildegard of Bingen, was commissioned by Dr. Latham in 2010 for the Daylesford Abbey. Conductor Gareth Haynes confidently led the WSMP Festival Choir which was comprised of current and alum singers of the Concert Choir at Temple University, Voces8, and Opera Delaware, to form a brilliant balance of experienced choral and solo voices. The harkening of Bingen's original poem and chant, *O frondes Virga*, resonated throughout the abbey, commencing with a solo female voice and then blossoming into a rich-textured four-part setting of the English translation. Neikirk has a gift for arcing the verses by her skillful use of dynamics juxtaposed with lush harmonies, balancing the "old" and the "new" by means of alternating between chant and contemporary harmonic structure. Set in D minor, she brings a hint of F major at the end

of the first verse, "now rejoice and be glad!" An unexpected chromatic melody that paints the words "free from evil habits" was a wonderful transition into the end of the poem, "and stretch forth your hand and lift us up!" It was a delightful work to begin the program.

The live premiere of **Sarah Kitten's** "I Cannot Dance, O Love" was beautifully set to Jean Wiebe Janzen's text from the *Voices Found: Women in the Church's Song* hymnal. This composition was commissioned through an ongoing partnership between WSMP and the Philadelphia's Young Women Composers Camp, a summer two-week music festival celebrating young composers ages 14-22, founded by award-winning composer, Erin Busch. Ms. Kitten was commissioned by Dr. Ted Latham to compose a work from a chosen text from the *Voices Found* hymnal. Dr. Latham conducted the a cappella vocal ensemble with sensitivity and beauty. The first verse was displayed in 4/4 meter, with a lovely melodic line and occasional ascending leaps to paint the words "lift me up." Ms. Kitten chose compound meter to express the second verse "round us, we glide as birds in the air;" which gave a joyous dance-like feel. The last verse is set back in the original meter and ends with a mixture of modal and diatonic keys, perhaps symbolic of God and the soul.

Dr. Cynthia Folio's riveting composition, "Lydia's Giving," with text by Susan Albertine, was dedicated to Founding President of WSMP Lisa Neufeld Thomas. A beautiful rendering of the story taken from the Book of Acts, Dr. Folio chose exquisite instrumentation to illuminate the character of Lydia of Thyatira. The work succeeded on a multifaceted level with a balanced blend



of dance, drama, narration and song. The Voice of Lydia, sung by Dr. Cara Oestreicher Latham, was stunning, illuminating her effortless high soprano while the Narrator, Dianne Rotwitt, spoke the story with dramatic clarity. The use of various percussive instruments in tandem with the vocal ensemble was declamatory and exciting. The acoustics of the church were amplified by the strategic placement of the instrumental and vocal ensembles so as not to detract attention from the beautifully sensitive dancer, the role of Lydia. Grace Stern's stunning performance told the story of the strong and faithful Lydia, exhibiting passion and control with focused energy. The compelling and graceful choreography was created by Temple University's visionary, Kun-Yang Lin.

Audrey Wu's work, "The Earth Melts," with text taken from Psalm 46, was a nice surprise and involved audience participation. Dr. Latham coached the audience how to become part of the performance with clear instructions and made it fun for all. The men were to make a "sh" sound to imitate rushing wind, while the women were asked to sound like the sounds of nature by starting on a note high in their range and gliding down to a note slightly lower. The piece starts and

ends with a still and beautiful diatonic chant-like theme. The piano accompaniment introduces themes and textures that are then carried out by the vocal ensemble. The piece was a pure delight and I suspect this will become a standard in the chorale canon. Audrey was watching her premiere via livestream from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London.

The last piece of the afternoon, **Dr. Anne Neikirk's**, "The Soul's Beauty: A Choral Song Cycle" with text from St. Augustine of Hippo and translated by Dr. Allan Fitzgerald, was a chiasmus of nine micro-movements. Dr. Ted Latham had commissioned this piece for the St. Thomas of Villanova parish and some of his parish singers were in the ensemble. Dr. Neikirk explained how she was inspired by St. Augustine's text which reflects cycles and dichotomies and how she explored using intervals, imitation, spoken word, and pairing of voices to reflect the text. Violinist, Dr. Azer Damirov and pianist, Gareth Haynes played with sublime legato and sensitivity. The movements were brief and the entire piece was only a little over 6 minutes, but somehow we were transported through an entire lifetime.

FEATURE

International Women's Day: Choose to Challenge

Lyn Loewi, WSMP Board Member

International Women's Day is a global celebration of the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. Marked annually on **March 8th**, International Women's Day (IWD) is one of the most important days of the year to:

- celebrate women's achievements
- raise awareness about women's equality
- lobby for accelerated gender parity
- fundraise for women-focused charities.

International Women's Day (IWD) began in the early 1900's in a turbulent, industrialized world where the population growth between 1900-1910 was an astonishing 21%. In the absence of federal labor laws, women organized to protest child labor, unsafe working conditions, and long hours, and to demand a minimum wage and the right to vote. Dangerous and exploitative working conditions enabled New York's tragic Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911, killing 146 people, mostly Jewish and Italian immigrant women. The factory owners were found not guilty, and the National Labor Relations Act, legalizing labor unions and the right to strike would not be passed until 1935.

In recent years, IWD has once again served as a centering point for women. Issues like #MeToo and #TimesUp have energized the need for better policies and laws around sexual assault and sexual harassment. The Women's March in 2017 was the largest single-day protest in American history.



But how do we as musicians connect *our* work to International Women's Day? This is an opportunity to celebrate women poets, composers, cantors, conductors, and performers. This is also a time to protest in solidarity their silence and invisibility the other 51 weeks of the year. Sacred musicians are a small, but powerful subculture; how we describe the She/He nature of God, identify systems of oppression in our worship traditions, and strive to reclaim the unknowable, omni-gender divinity gets right to the core of patriarchal challenges we face the rest of the week.

Two ways we can promote International Women's Day:

- 1) Last year the Society of Women Organists (SWO) inaugurated "Women Composer Sunday." Organists posted videos of themselves playing a work by a woman composer. This year, the American Guild of Organists will join SWO and the Royal College of Organists to repeat the event. On March 6, 2022 organists are again invited to play works by women, posting their performances online with the hashtag, #WomenComposerSunday.
- 2) For the Women's Sacred Music Project, singing hymns from *Voices Found* makes sense on IWD. This important resource provides ways of engaging with God not readily encountered in the traditional, male-authored hymnals, such as the 1982 Episcopal hymnal. Poetry by women mystics, nuns, theologians, priests, ministers, and women of faith addresses God in the language of an oppressed people; they speak of fear, patience, self-sacrifice, surrender, mothers, birth, invisibility, and dependence. From their perspective, one end of a continuum, God represents an anchor of salvation. In the 1982 hymnal, the nature of God takes on a different gloss; from this end of the continuum, God is powerful, wonderful, glorious, triumphant, dressed in royal robes and seated on a throne. One's position in the cultural stratification makes all the difference.

Voices Found contains numerous hymns by women mystics: Kassia, Hildegard, Julian of Norwich, and Teresa of Avila. Their spiritual authority resonates from the past. The hymnal also includes hymns by Asian, Black, and Native women poets, as well as traditional Spirituals. These voices speak for multiple systems of oppression, and as such bring valuable imagery to our worship.

Voices Found includes many texts written by second generation feminists who challenged notions of God limited by patriarchy. They countered with hymns like "Mothering God," "Come and seek the ways of Wisdom," and "Apostle of the word" which contains the line, "For doubt of **woman's** tale, they all but failed to hear..." These women of the Vietnam generation questioned the Christianity they grew up with and sought to remove cultural stumbling blocks to their faith.

Voices Found includes many 19th century women hymn writers, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Still, still with Thee," Katherine Davis's "Let all things now living," and Cecil Frances Alexander's "All things bright and beautiful." They appeal to God as an ally in a mismatched world of power imbalance. Do these hymns still speak to 21st century women? An insight came to me during the pandemic, while visiting the Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia.

Artist Barbara Bullock explored African folklore and mythology in the Philadelphia diaspora. In strong, confident poses, subjects appeared in traditional, colorful clothes of African tribes. In some cases, an animal stood between the viewer and the subject. As the artist explained, they were avatars or gatekeepers to the spiritual and sacred realm. Philadelphia has been the center of terrible gun violence in the black community. The coronavirus, unleashed upon systemic racism, was killing blacks at twice the rate of whites. It was a reign of terror for black Philadelphians, and protective avatars were in short supply.

I find a parallel between the docile women hymn writers of the 19th century and the Philadelphia black community besieged by racism, violence, and plague. The 19th century poets saw God as an amulet: someone permanently on their side. These second-class, quasi-incarcerated women had no more autonomy than marginalized people today. Their hymns evoke a God who protects in childbirth and other perils. In reality, we all need this kind of protection from danger. The poetry of Katherine Davis, Fanny Crosby, and Catherine Wentworth evokes the Great Guardian, the Drinking Gourd, that points us to safety.

Voices Found offers many fine hymns for International Women's Day. Celebrate with a glass of champagne, an organ prelude, and a remarkable hymn by a woman composer.



Animal Healer (Healer Series), 1990

Barbara Bullock (b.1938)

Gouache on shaped paper

The Harold A. and Ann R. Sorgenti Collection of Contemporary African-American Art

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