

Spring 3-27-2011

# Marshall University Music Department Presents a Graduate Recital, Mary Elizabeth Withers, soprano

Mary Elizabeth Withers  
*Marshall University*

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## Recommended Citation

Withers, Mary Elizabeth, "Marshall University Music Department Presents a Graduate Recital, Mary Elizabeth Withers, soprano" (2011). *All Performances*. Book 414.  
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DEPARTMENT of MUSIC

presents a

**Graduate Recital**

**Mary Elizabeth Withers, soprano**

assisted by

**Pamela Johnson, piano**

**Briana Blankenship, trumpet**

**Lindsay DiFatta, violin**

**Timothy Feverston, violin**

**James Kiger, cello**

**Sunday, March 27, 2011**

**Smith Recital Hall**

**4:00 p.m.**

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This program is presented by the College of Fine Arts through the Department of Music, with the support of student activity funds. For more information about this or other music events, please call (304) 696-3117, or view our website at [www.marshall.edu/cofa/music](http://www.marshall.edu/cofa/music).

Program

*Su le sponde del Tebro*

Sinfonia. Grave  
Recitativo  
Sinfonia - Aria  
Recitativo  
Aria - Largo  
Aria - Ritornello  
Recitativo  
Aria - Sinfonia. Grave

Alessandro Scarlatti  
(1660-1725)

*Ariettes Oubliées*

C'est l'extase langoureuse  
Il pleure dans mon coeur  
L'ombre des arbres  
Chevaux de bois  
Green  
Spleen

Claude Debussy  
(1862-1918)

*Intermission*

*Hermit Songs*

At St. Patrick's Purgatory  
Church Bell at Night  
St. Ita's Vision  
The Heavenly Banquet  
The Crucifixion  
Sea Snatch  
Promiscuity  
The Monk and his Cat  
The Praises of God  
The Desire for Hermitage

Samuel Barber  
(1910-1981)

*Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante from Carmen*

Georges Bizet  
(1838-1875)

*Quando m'en vo' from La Bohème*

Giacomo Puccini  
(1858-1924)

## Program Notes

### *Su le sponde del Tebro.*

Alessandro Scarlatti (May 2, 1660 - October 24, 1725), the father of the baroque opera, early 18<sup>th</sup> century opera in Naples, Italy, also composed at least 600 cantatas. *Su le sponde del Tebro* is a sparkling Baroque chamber cantata scored for soprano, tromba, two violins, harpsichord and cello.

The cantata can be described as an opera on a smaller scale, and uses recitatives, and arias to tell a secular story without the use of costumes or scenery. Cantatas were commissioned by Italian aristocracy for entertainment on special occasions. According to Rosalind Halton in *Baroque Music* it is truly "singer's music" and deserves more attention. After all, *cantare*, in Italian, does mean "to sing", therefore, it remains a mystery as to why more singers do not tap into this rich body of repertoire. In Scarlatti's case, perhaps this is because the cantatas are not readily available in print; one would have to dig through at least three separately housed collections between the United States and Europe to find them.

Although many are undated, an idea of the dates of composition can be locally determined by studying the evolution of Scarlatti's style throughout the works. *Su le sponde del Tebro* was most likely written during Scarlatti's late period, around 1690, because of his use of chromaticism and the complexity of the arias. Despite the fact that the trumpet went on to enjoy a prominent role in chamber music, trumpet was no longer used in obbligato in Italian works after 1700. This suggests that *Su le sponde del Tebro* could have also been written in an earlier period.

Scarlatti used the *da capo* form for arias and continuo accompaniment, but in the cantata's arias, it may prove difficult for the audience to stay involved with the text, as it is frequently repeated. The florid lyrics can sometimes be difficult to follow as one short stanza can be turned into several pages of music. After all, "Baroque" means "pearl encrusted with gems." Such ornamentation was acceptable in all fine arts at that time.

The cantata opens with a sinfonia. The following narrative recitative, for the singer and harpsichord only, sets up a pastoral scene on the bank of the Tiber river in Rome, where the shepherd Aminta was betrayed by his Chloris. The singer serves as the narrator in the recitatives and as Aminta in the arias. The next sinfonia is a prelude to the first *da capo* aria, with trumpet obbligato. The voice acts as a second trumpet as the soprano exclaims through melismas and echoes of the trumpet, "Be content, O faithful thoughts remain guardian of my heart!"

The trumpet is quiet for the next three sections. A melancholy recitative then makes way for a slow, chromatic aria, followed by the singer's rhythmic grief-stricken aria about the "cruel stars". An energetic ritornello deceptively sets up the final slow recitative where Aminta accepts his fate. The trumpet returns in the final aria in which Aminta "ceases

to weep." It is in a major key and has a lively tempo. The work closes with a short heroic sinfonia.

### *Ariettes Oubliées*

Claude Debussy's (August 22, 1862 - March 25, 1918) *Ariettes Oubliées*, "Forgotten Airs", is a six-movement song cycle for voice and piano composed from 1885-1887, on poems by the symbolist Paul Verlaine. It was a pivotal work in the evolution of Debussy's style from traditional Post-Romantic to an individual style marked by tonal ambiguity and use of a new harmonic language with devices such as quartal chords, dominant ninth chords, increased chromaticism, pentatonicism, and modality. These devices characterized the Impressionistic movement in music, but Debussy despised being called Impressionistic and preferred being known as a symbolist.

Debussy studied at the Paris Conservatory but had run-ins with the composition faculty, left school, returned and won a Prix de Rome in 1884 for his cantata, *L'enfant prodigue* (*The Prodigal Son*). The prize was a three-year stay at Villa Medici in Rome, where he could fully pursue composition. Separation from the object of his affection, married singer Madame Blanche Vasnier, paired with his homesickness for Paris, inspired Debussy to begin composition of *Ariettes Oubliées*, and the first publication was dedicated to Vasnier. Its second publication was dedicated to Scottish-American soprano Mary Garden, the first to actually sing the cycle. Her voice was not considered perfect, but Debussy loved her ability to express text and she fully devoted herself to her craft. The collaboration led to a life-long friendship and mutual admiration.

The first song, *C'est l'extase* is considered one of Debussy's best examples of text painting. The opening vocal line, "It is languorous ecstasy", descends, then sighs, followed by a section typical of Debussy, that of chromatic passages moving more quickly than preceding sections on alliterated text, enhancing the idea of "breezes rustling the branches." *Il pleure dans mon coeur* reflects the French idea of *ennui*, a blasé feeling whose reason cannot be determined. It consists of long, arching vocal lines, accompanied by Debussy's raindrop motive, 16<sup>th</sup> note figures in the accompaniment.

*L'ombres des arbres*, whose text is based on an epigraph by Cyrano de Bergerac, describes a nightingale who believes it has fallen into the river because it can see its reflection from the branch on which it is perched. It is metaphorical for the "pale traveler", whose hopes have already drowned. Although it is in a major key, along with the slow tempo, the modality created by the accidentals placed at climax points, create mournfulness.

*Chevaux de bois* is the only lively song in the set. It is a major key and depicts the happiness of the narrator, who according to Pierre Bernac, is riding the merry-go-round at a village fair in Belgium. However, the rider is riding to escape his life of poverty and sadness. In the final section of the song, the tempo slows to half of the original tempo depicting the final ride at night

fall, returns to *tempo primo* for one line, indicating that the ride and the dream have come to a halt.

Two *aquarelles*, songs depicting the transparent quality of was colors, *Green* and *Spleen*, complete the cycle. The titles are in English, because Verlaine liked the rhyme and metaphor of the words used together, “green” sounding fresh, innocent, while “spleen” stale and jaded.

*Green* equates love to the abundance of nature, (fruits, flowers, leaves in the trees) and ends in a peaceful sleep. It is in three sections. The middle section uses Debussy’s typical chromatic passage on alliterated text; then back to the florid theme of the opening.

*Spleen* begins with a low, recitative-like lament followed by a high outcry. It is a song of despair in response to a lover having done something “at-tious.” The vocal line becomes intentionally monotonous, and the music fades away, listlessly, creating a mood of unresolved despair.

### *Hermit Songs*

Samuel Barber (March 9, 1910 – January 23, 1981), an American 20<sup>th</sup> century composer, composed many genres in the Neo-Romantic style. His song cycle *Hermit Songs* is a challenging set using texts of translated poetry of medieval Irish monks. The poems portray the daily activities and affections of the monks.

The “hermit” theme ran through Barber’s life, as his family’s vacation cabin on the Pocono Reserve was nicknamed “The Hermit.” “In this sphere of composing you are alone”, Samuel Barber is quoted in the chapter *Song Cycles* in Barbara Heyman’s book *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music*. Inspired by his first pilgrimage to Ireland in 1952, Barber composed the cycle in six weeks, breaking only for the holidays.

Describing his upcoming composition based on the translation of the monastic writings, Barber noted, in a letter to Sidney Homer, “these were extraordinary men, monks or hermits or whatnot, and they wrote these little poems on the corners of the manuscripts they were illuminating or just copying. I find them very direct, unspoiled and contemporaneous in feeling.”

The texts revealed repression and a human side to these quiet, solitary men, significant in that such thoughts are universal and transcend time. Various scholars translated the texts and many of the poems became famous.

Driven solely by the texts, Barber used several of the available translations. However, needing more of a story for *The Monk and His Cat*, *The Praises of God*, and *St. Ita’s Vision*, he commissioned well-known poets W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman respectively for deeper translation. To allow the irregular text the greatest flexibility, Barber omitted metrical markings, adding to the medieval quality of the cycle. Unusually so for Barber, he also made many revisions to the work, line by line, again, to ensure the purest expression

of text. The musical style of the cycle is indicative of Barber’s middle period, through the contrasting moods and forms.

*St. Patrick’s Purgatory* depicts the hermit’s feeling towards his upcoming pilgrimage to Loch Derg, a site in Donegal that is still sought after today as a place of spiritual renewal.

*St. Ita’s Vision* is aria-like, with an angular recitative, followed by a lyrical lullaby about nursing the Infant Jesus, thus is juxtaposed by *The Heavenly Banquet*, in which the narrator imagines what it would be like to have Heaven’s inhabitants, including Jesus, for a party!

*Crucifixion* is the most solemn, reflecting on the Crucifixion, followed by fast, angry *Sea-Snatch*, an outcry using the surging sea as a metaphor. *Promiscuity* packs the greatest shock of text into the shortest song in the cycle. *The Monk and His Cat* is a swinging quintessential vision of a monk, his cat, and their daily routine. *The Desire for Hermitage* brings the cycle full circle and again reiterates the theme of hermitage. It begins slowly and contemplatively. The stirring, reflective piano interlude suggests repression briefly released and then returns to the opening theme. The Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation commissioned *Hermit Songs* for its Founder’s Day celebration. Barber selected soprano Leontyne Price who was noted for her performance of *Porgy and Bess* but had not had a recital debut yet. He accompanied her for the premiere performance in the Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress, and began a long professional collaboration and friendship.

### *Je dis que rien ne m’épouvante*

Georges Bizet (October 25, 1838-June 3, 1875)

“Michäela’s Aria” appears in Act III of Bizet’s popular opera *Carmen*. It is arguably the most beautiful female aria in the opera, despite that fact that Carmen, not the peasant girl Michäela, is the main character.

In the action preceding the aria, the mother of Don José, a young brigadier, has sent a letter to him carried by the young peasant girl Michäela. The letter begs him to marry Michäela to which he agrees. When a brawl occurs in the cigarette factory on the square, the gypsy girl Carmen is accused of stabbing a girl. Assigned to guard her, Don José is soon mesmerized and lets her go free. He is subsequently dismissed as a brigadier and sent to prison. When released, he goes to Carmen, now obsessed with her. He even joins the band of smugglers that she has attracted.

Michäela returns to notify Don José that his mother is dying and that he must go home. The aria begins as she timidly approaches the mountain pass where she believes Don José is hiding with Carmen and the smugglers. Michäela prays she will have courage to face Carmen and any other danger that she might encounter.

### *Quando m’en vo’*

Giacomo Puccini (December 22, 1858-November 29, 1924)

"Musetta's Waltz" appears in Act II of Puccini's beloved opera *La Bohème*. It is versimo at its finest, a romantic story of four young "starving artists" in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris.

The setting is Café Momms in the Latin Quarter on Christmas Eve. The poet Marcello is celebrating with a group of his friends. Musetta arrives on the arm of the wealthy Alcindoro, who is loaded down with things he has bought her. Determined to make Marcello jealous, she exclaims how "beautiful and popular she is, and that all the men look at her as she walks down the street!" Seeing Marcello's response and satisfied that he is still in love with her, she sends Alcindoro away and commences to flirt with Marcello.

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**Melanie Griffis, Director of Development**

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