



VOICEMAIL



Incarnation at the Abbey



A concert at the St. Louis Abbey is always a favorite for singers and their audience. Held on December 21, on a surprisingly pleasant afternoon (considering the weather a few weeks later), a large number of supporters and parish members arrived for the concert.

The program was based on the great mystery of Christ's birth and revolved around seven different settings of *O*

Magnum Mysterium. The repertoire ranged from the sixteenth century mass by Tomás Luis da Victoria up to the present day with a new commission and world premiere of *The Mystery of Life* by chorus member **Carter Datz** that began the second half. As he has done with previous performances, **Philip Barnes** took the entire mass by Tomás Luis da Victoria and interspersed other, mostly later works, with early versions by Giovanni Gabrieli and Alessandro Scarlatti, being the exceptions. Some of the pieces were familiar to this audience from earlier concerts including *Before the Ice*, a previous SLCC commission by Bob Chilcott, and versions of *O Magnum Mysterium* by Judith Bingham and Morten Lauridsen in the second half.

The first setting of the featured text after the opening pieces by da Victoria was another sixteenth century work by Giovanni Gabrieli, followed by Francis Poulenc's twentieth century version. Peter Maxwell Davies' more recent setting followed the Gloria and Bob Chilcott's splendid version ended the first half after the Credo.

The second half began with the much-awaited new composition by SLCC's own **Carter Datz**. Last season, we all enjoyed his Christmas carol, *Alleluya! A New Work Is Come On Hand*. This is his second composition for the Chorus and was written expressly for this performance. His score for *The Mystery of Life* was written for double choir using a similar technique—combining two contrasting verses. In this work he set Harriet Beecher Stowe's, *The Hours of the Night* with both the English and Latin texts of *O Magnum Mysterium*. The same technique was used by Bob Chilcott's *Before the Ice*, contrasting *O Magnum Mysterium* with lines from Emily Dickinson.



Judith Bingham juxtaposed the miracle of the birth of Jesus with the dark undercurrent of Herod's killing of the first-born sons. Music critic **George Yeh** from SubStack, commented that of the more modern-sounding pieces, "the Lauridsen was probably the closest in sound-world to the older pieces, in its unabashed tonality and richer sonorities, closing the official portion of the concert quietly with very low male-centered tones. The SLCC performed very well throughout the concert, to its customary strong standards and high level of preparation."

Gill Waltman

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SAINT LOUIS
CHAMBER
CHORUS

Message from the President

Dear Friends,

In the November 2025 issue of VoiceMail, we introduced three new members of the board of directors, **Jeanne Bartling Gillanders**, **Scott Lunte** and **Carr Trovillion**.

I am delighted to give a brief introduction to three additional new board members; **Bruce Ryder**, **Brook Bisailon** and **Julie Schuster**. We will provide more complete bios about these leaders in another issue of VoiceMail later this year.

As a singer, **Bruce Ryder** has been in demand throughout St. Louis for years, singing with the SLCC, the Bach Society, Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral Choir and the choirs of Trinity Presbyterian Church and St. Peter's Episcopal Church. Bruce has served on the boards of several charitable organizations devoted to music. **Linda Ryder**, our former Executive Director, has been married to Bruce for over twenty years, and highly recommends him!

We are very lucky that **Brook Bisailon** has agreed to serve on our board. She has sung with the SLCC for the last 10 years. She has a Masters of Music degree and

serves as the Assistant Choral Director and Accompanist for Lindbergh High School. She has served as an accompanist in churches and schools throughout St. Louis and for the First National Tour of "Wicked" while working on her Masters of Music.

Julie Schuster brings a unique background to the board. A journalist, she has worked in both print and radio. For the last 13 years, she has served Classic 107.3 - Radio Arts Foundation, as both an on-air host and, for the last 4 years, as CEO and General Manager. Her knowledge of the music business and people involved in it is unmatched.

While the specifics of their backgrounds are important, what is even more important to me is that Bruce, Brook and Julie all share a very deep love of choral music and love for the SLCC.

One final note—we are launching our latest CD, *St. Louis Passions*, this month. The music will be available on the CD and on streaming services. The Chorus is proud of the recording. We hope you will enjoy it.

Dick Brickson

Singer - Michelle Simmons



Michelle's musical interests were passed down to her from her family. Her parents were always humming a tune, and her father grew up around music through choir and his own father's work as a church music director and

organist. With this background, Michelle loved singing and became involved in music very early through school choir.

Although Michelle has lived in the St. Louis area for the past four years, she is Canadian/American by birth and grew up in Shanghai and Hanoi. While living in Asia, she attended international schools with high quality education and music programs. Her teachers encouraged her while sharing their love of music, especially **Dr. Nancy Durance** and **Martha Seibel**. Attempts at piano, guitar, and percussion proved fleeting, but singing always persisted.

When Michelle's family relocated to Indiana during high school, she auditioned and was accepted into the school's seventy-person *a cappella* choir and select chamber choir. Director, **Tavis Schlicker**, and fellow choir members pushed her to improve her skillset and technique. They sang a challenging repertoire of sacred music, touring to St. Louis and New York City.

During this time, Michelle also got involved in musical theater and was able to participate in All-State choir and ISSMA choral, vocal jazz, and solo competitions. Outside of school, she sang at Carnegie Hall for a choral hymn festival celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

She attended Concordia University Chicago to study Middle School Education, and continued singing with the Kapelle choir under the direction of **Dr. Charles Brown**. She says, "his faith, expertise, and joyful personality made choir fun and profoundly impactful. Performances included annual Lessons and Carols services, Bach cantatas, and multiple tours throughout the Midwest, Florida, and Scotland and England. The choir also introduced me to two very important people in my life: my husband, Benjamin, and friend for life/fellow SLCC soprano **Maggie Tritten**."

After graduating, Michelle became a middle school English, Religion and Drama teacher at Immanuel Lutheran School in St. Charles where Maggie leads Children's Ministry for the church. They were roommates during Michelle's first season with the Chorus. "Maggie would come home late on Monday nights with a folder full of music to show me." She thought that the music sounded hard, but also knew that she wanted to sing it! **Dick Deitte**, whom I sang with in Immanuel's Boar's Head, encouraged me to audition last January for an alternate spot. Philip graciously accepted me and I've been singing with the Chorus ever since."

Michelle is grateful to God for the gift of music and singing, and blessed to be a part of the Chamber Chorus. She particularly enjoys Philip's selection of both secular and sacred pieces and unique venues, especially the recent Christmas program at the St. Louis Abbey featuring the "O Magnum Mysterium" arrangements. "I attended the SLCC's last concert at the Abbey so it felt like a very full circle moment to sing there now with the group. Outside of singing, I enjoy sitting in the cheap/free seats at the Fox and Muny, playing board games with my husband, traveling, and reading."

Gill Waltman

Singer - Ben Thompson



Ben Thompson was born and raised in Boulder, Colorado, and started playing piano at the age of six. He loved being in choir class in elementary school but his love for singing really took off in high school. While never formally trained in singing, Ben's strength in choir came from his ability to listen to those around

him and blend his voice into others. It helped bring him to an appearance at All State Choir in 2016. However, piano was always his forte. While in high school, he was awarded multiple mentions to All-State Jazz Band, the Boulder Area Music Teachers Association Award, Senior of the Year in 2016, as well as a Downbeat Award in 2016.

Ben attended the University of Colorado in Boulder, graduating in 2020. During his time there, he performed piano with the National Repertory Orchestra where he worked with **Michael Stern, Chris Deviney, and She-e Wu**. He was also given a grant by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) for a composition analysis project. He wrote a piece for Jazz Orchestra entitled "Keep Moving," a song that replicates the amount of stress he felt attending college and music school. During 2020, he was selected to perform in the International Association for Schools of Jazz conference in New York City; unfortunately, the conference was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite how busy he was with his piano work, his love for singing never waned. He sang in the University Choir during his sophomore year as well as the jazz choir both his sophomore and junior years.

After working under the tutelage of pianists **Jeff Jenkins, Andrew Cooperstock, Victor Mestas, and Art Lande**, Ben graduated with a Bachelor of Music in Jazz Piano Performance.

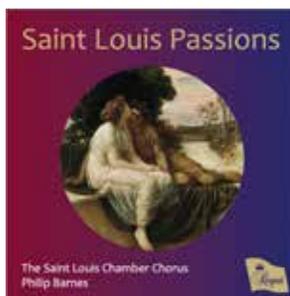
After college, Ben pursued a career teaching music. He had taught private lessons since he was in high school, but went into full-time teaching when he accepted a position as collaborative pianist of choirs at Niwot High School, right outside Boulder. He worked there for 3 years.

This experience brought Ben back into the thick of working with choral programs and got him wanting to sing again. In 2021, he auditioned and joined Cantabile Boulder. He also performed with Kantorei, Denver. The first concert was "Berlioz' Requiem", directed by Robert Spano. The second concert was "The Sacred Veil", directed and written by Eric Whitacre.

In 2023, Ben decided to accept a position to play piano at the USAF Band of Mid-America in Scott AFB, in Illinois. Despite this massive change in his life, Ben was excited at the new prospect of performing around the St. Louis area! He wanted to perform as pianist for sure, but also as a singer. When he Googled choirs in the St. Louis area, the Saint Louis Chamber Chorus was one of the first to pop up! After completing Basic Military Training and moving to St. Louis, he auditioned and was accepted into the SLCC. Ben also loves getting to perform piano in St. Louis! You can find him very frequently playing with musicians such as **Bob Deboo, Kendrick Smith, Bernard Terry, Demarius Hicks, Dakota Pagan, and Dustin Shrum** just to name a few. Ben is now preparing for a 6-month deployment in Qatar where he will be performing all around the MENA region.

Gill Waltman

New CD - Saint Louis Passions



Those attending the Christmas program were treated to a 'pre-release' of our latest CD whose official launch is this month, to coincide with Valentine's Day: after all, it is titled *Saint Louis Passions*. Staying with British label, REGENT, ensures that these new selections will be added to the company's Spotify playlist, so for those

who have abandoned their compact disc players, there's still immediate access to these recordings which were made a year ago. Twelve months may seem a long time, but in the industry it's actually quite short, given the numerous stages of production, from sound editing to the writing and proofing of printed materials. And as that is proceeding, the company must also do its 'due diligence' in securing copyright permission from the various composers, authors, publishers concerned. Image rights can also be a challenge, especially when negotiating the copyright laws as applied by different countries: what is in

the 'public domain' in the US may not be in the European Union, for example. These considerable efforts are worth it to create a permanent witness to the Chorus's advocacy for new music, for women composers, and simply for itself - these recordings attest to the choir's remarkable quality.

This new recording, like its immediate predecessor, *Saint Louis Reflections*, was made at Third Baptist Church in Grand Center. The choice of this space for the project was guided by several factors that include acoustic, recording flexibility and affordability. The sanctuary is unusual, being 'encased' within a larger building that helps to block extraneous noise. The church authorities are accommodating to the set-up of multiple microphones and placement of the singers, and they support the project by excusing the fees usually associated with an outside 'rental.' All this lets the performers, engineer and producer focus on the music itself, which then facilitates long 'takes' instead of the patchwork quilt nature of many commercial recordings. (See more on page 4.)

Philip Barnes

NOTEWORTHY NOTES

Protest - From Martin Luther to Bob Dylan

On the auspicious date of November 16 – Philip Barnes’ birthday – the Chorus decided to protest all manner of things, from Luther’s Reformation to Hanns Eisler’s socialist ‘agit-prop.’ As described by Philip, a notable feature of the program was the premiere of Pete Seeger’s ballad, “Where Have All The Flowers Gone?” as arranged



by Assistant Conductor, **Orin Johnson**. He had a busy day, not only singing his own music but also leading the Chorus in an encore of “Happy Birthday” that concluded the afternoon. His fellow Assistant Conductor,

Caroline Ibnabdeljalil, also played an important role in our long overdue return to the Lutheran Church of the Atonement in Florissant: she led a section of German political protests – arrangements of the anonymous, “At least my thoughts are free” that interspersed declarations from the Prussian 1848 Revolution made by Robert Schumann, a classical composer one does not readily associate with politics.

Perhaps more obvious choices were songs by the first American composer, William Billings, who lived in Boston and had supported Paul Revere. More recent political controversy here in the USA inspired a powerful setting of words in support of the Equal Marriage Act from **Melissa Dunphy**, one of our past Composers-in-Residence. Like her, the late **Yakov Gubanov** worked with us for several seasons, and it was to his teacher, Shostakovich, that the Chorus looked for examples of Soviet propaganda dressed up as art. Thanks to the invaluable help of language coaching from **Mikhail Palatnik**, who teaches



Russian at Washington University, the singers negotiated five of Shostakovich’s arrangements of Russian revolutionary poets. While the texts may have had dubious value, the music transcended their

shortcomings and was especially powerful in Atonement’s acoustic, which the choir exploited by standing right against the concave east wall. Its brick surface acted in effect as a ‘sound shell,’ reminding us that the Chorus’ primary focus is not sight, but sound.

Recording CDs with Regent

As mentioned on the previous page, long “takes” in the same setting are preferable when recording a CD. Regent prides itself on conveying the sense of a live performance, maintaining the impetus and arc of each track – which can be lost if a single track is derived from numerous excerpts. Listeners may decide for themselves how successful this approach has been with *Passions*, and we feel confident in the judgement.

The new recording is remarkable for three features: it’s our first project with British producer, **Myles Eastwood**, whose insights proved invaluable on a practical level. Never before have we collaborated with an instrumentalist, but in Francis Pott’s song cycle, *Ardor Amoris*, we were able to showcase our wonderful pianist, **Diana Umali**, normally only heard by us at rehearsals. Finally, this is our most thorough interweaving of SLCC commissions with established repertoire. The resulting contrast offers a unique insight into the choir’s flexibility and range. It marks a significant addition to our catalog of recordings, and is a collection you won’t want to be without: copies may now be purchased at concerts, on our website, or soon through Spotify.

Philip Barnes



Chorus members in holiday cheer in the Abbey at the rehearsal for the December concert.

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