

Transforming Texts: New Music for Voices

Susan Narucki soprano
Kirsten Ashley Wiest , soprano
Donald Berman piano

Wednesday, January 14, 2026 @ 7 p.m.

Rozalie Hirs *come sempre* * (2025)
 for two sopranos

Marti Epstein *Melisande*** (2022)
 for two sopranos

Susan Narucki and Kirsten Ashley Wiest, sopranos

PAUSE

Scott Wheeler *Ausländer Lieder** (2025)
 1. Immer das Wort
 2. Als gäbe es
 3. Mutter Sprache
 4. Hinter der Haut
 5. Nichts übrig
 6. Stille nacht
 7. Wenn ich vergehe
 8. Bekenntis
 9. Jenseits

Alba L. Potes *Siete Haiku* (1994)

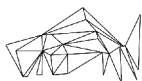
Four Songs by American composers

Samuel Barber	<i>Music, when Soft Voices Die</i>
Charles Ives	<i>The Housatonic at Stockbridge</i>
Charles Naginski	<i>Look Down, Fair Moon</i>
Charles Ives	<i>West London</i>

Susan Narucki, soprano and Donald Berman piano

* World Premiere

** West Coast Premiere



About the artists

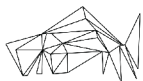
American soprano **Susan Narucki** has forged a unique path; her dedication to the music of our time has led to critically acclaimed performances with musicians of the first rank and close collaborations with generations of composers. She has appeared as a soloist with the Cleveland Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Netherlands Opera and numerous appearances at Carnegie Hall. She has commissioned, produced and performed two critically acclaimed chamber operas: *Inheritance* (2018) by Grawemeyer Award winning composer Lei Liang, addressing gun violence in America and *Cuatro Corridos* (2013), based on a true story of human trafficking in the San Diego border region. The operas earned major philanthropic support from the MAP Fund for the Performing Arts, UC MEXUS, Creative Capital Foundation, New Music USA, as well as multiple awards from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Susan's extensive discography includes 2019 Grammy nomination for Best Classical Solo Vocal Album for *The Edge of Silence: Vocal Music of Kurtág* (AVIE). Her most recent recording, Kurtág's *Kafka Fragments*, with violinist Curtis Macomber, was named BBC Music Magazine's Vocal Recording of the Month in August 2025 and was nominated for a 2026 Grammy Award. Susan serves as Distinguished Professor of Music at the UC San Diego.

Kirsten Ashley Wiest

Award-winning coloratura soprano, Kirsten Ashley Wiest, is firmly committed to the continuous evolution of classical vocal music. Her “extraordinary performance virtuosity” (Sequenza 21) and “bright, dazzling vocal technique” (San Diego Story) have captivated composers worldwide, resulting in over 80 world premiere performances and premiere recordings including works by Veronika Krausas (CA/US), James Erber (UK), Gérard Pape (FR), Jeffrey Holmes (US), and Grawemeyer Award-winner Lei Liang (CN/US).

Kirsten has sung with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Diego Symphony, Bang on a Can All-Stars, Grammy-winning Partch ensemble, Hear Now Festival of New Music, wild Up new music collective, and La Jolla Symphony and Chorus, among many others. She has performed at venues including Walt Disney Concert Hall (CA), REDCAT (CA), Aratani Japan America Theater (CA), Théâtre Le Palace (FR), Autonomous University of Baja California (MX), and the Moore Theater (WA). Kirsten has given solo recitals on concert series hosted by Tuesdays@MONK, Boston Court Pasadena, Harvey Mudd College, Chapman University, and others. She was a featured soloist in the LA Philharmonic's season-long installation, Nimbus, and has recorded for several interactive operatic experiences and film scores including Malignant and the Conjuring series. Her voice can be heard on recordings released by Sony Classical, Centaur Records, MicroFest Records, innova recordings, and Albany Records, among others.



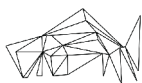
Kirsten holds a DMA in Contemporary Music Performance from UC San Diego and an MFA from California Institute of the Arts. Alongside performing, Kirsten teaches voice at San Bernardino Valley College and University of California Riverside.

Donald Berman

A multidimensional pianist, pedagogue, and scholar, Donald Berman has won tremendous acclaim for his "stupendous abilities, both athletic and intellectual" (Boston Sunday Globe) and performances hailed as "stunning, adventurous, and substantive" (New York Times). With an emphasis on presenting American music of the 20th and 21st centuries, Berman's inventive recital programs have been featured on the U.S.'s biggest stages for contemporary music — from Carnegie's Weill and Zankel Halls to National Sawdust and (Le) Poisson Rouge — as well as major venues across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. An enthusiastic commissioner of new music, he has added more than 200 works to the contemporary canon — many of which he performs alongside classical repertoires to provoke new and fascinating revelations and connections across periods and styles.

Berman's body of work as a recording artist demonstrates the breadth and depth of his engagement with the music of our time. His albums have included numerous world-premiere recordings as well as illuminating performances of previously unknown works of 20th-century American composers, including Charles Ives (The Unknown Ives, Vols. I & II), Carl Ruggles (The Uncovered Ruggles), and Elliott Carter and Roger Sessions (Americans in Rome). As concerto soloist and chamber musician, Berman's discography includes collaborations with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (George Perle: Serenades), soprano Susan Narucki (This Island, The Light That Is Felt: Songs of Charles Ives, and the Grammy-nominated *The Edge of Silence*), and the Borromeo Quartet (The Worlds Revolve). Recent releases include a new recording of Ives's Concord Sonata and Impression of the St. Gaudens in Boston Common, released on Avie Records during the composer's sesquicentennial celebrations in 2024.

A former fellow of the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Berman currently serves as Chair of Keyboard Studies at Longy School of Music at Bard College and leads Tufts University's New Music Ensemble.



About the program

come sempre (2025)

come sempre is a new duo for soprano and coloratura soprano by Rozalie Hirs, commissioned by Susan Narucki and dedicated to its first performers, Susan Narucki (soprano) and Kirsten Ashley Wiest (coloratura soprano). The text is taken from the opening poem of Hirs' eighth collection, *ecologica* (Uitgeverij Vleugels, 2023), here sung in the Italian translation by Patrizia Filia, to be published in the Italian edition of *ecologica* (Nous Editrice, Catania, 2026; forthcoming).

At the heart of *come sempre* lies the joy of singing — and of singing together. Hirs deliberately writes clear, singable melodic lines that move around broadly conceived, flexible tonal centers, which shift gradually to create a transparent, responsive harmonic landscape. The two voices engage in multiple forms of interaction: dialogue and responsorial exchange, completing each other's melody or text, shaping a single line together, or moving in parallel melody and functional harmony. Vocal roles alternate constantly, creating a lively, open interplay without a fixed hierarchy. The musical language is inspired by *bel canto*, with its emphasis on legato, breath, and vocal agility, yet extended into a contemporary idiom. Italian is used intentionally for its natural vocality and rich resonance, which enhance the lyrical and physical character of the music.

Hirs' poem centers around a pair of Siberian cranes, a critically endangered species, described as: “the last/ pair of siberian cranes surprisingly still alive.” Cranes are known for lifelong pair bonds, distinctive dance and song, and seasonal migration. In the poem, this symbolism gains sharp contemporary urgency: the cranes are a real, nearly vanished pair, representing the vulnerability of ecosystems.

Language itself is also under pressure: “surrender language in the name of the last/ pair.” Words must be given over ethically, acknowledging their fragility. The cranes' commas become “reflective decapitation,” pauses and breaths that evoke ecological rupture. Hirs examines how language falters in the face of climate crisis and mass extinction, yet remains indispensable for articulating care, mourning, and responsibility.

- Adapted from the composer's website.

Melisande for two soprano voices (2022)

In 2022 I was asked to compose a piece for two sopranos, for the Peridot Duo. I have been interested in giving women in well-known literary contexts their own back stories. In every case, the woman in question exists as a foil to the male main characters, and in some cases, is merely a vehicle to move the story forward. For example, I have written about Mary Magdalen and about Jocasta, trying to give these women their own fully realized, richly layered story. Several years ago, I went to see Debussy's *Pelleas and Melisande* at the Met. I had never realized before that experience what a cipher Melisande at the Met. I had never realized before that experience what a cipher Melisande is. She just magically appears in the story, a young woman on whom every man imprints his own identity. Also- in the



program notes for that production, there was a mention that because a character named Melisande appears in Maeterlinck's play about Bluebeard, the character Melisande may have escaped Bluebeard's castle, only to find herself wandering into the set of *Peleas and Melisande*. I decided to put together a text made up of Melisande's dialogue in those two plays as well as text from Maeterlinck's botanical treatise, *The Intelligence of Flowers*. The resulting piece for two sopranos is really a commentary about the Melisande character, a telling of her story.

- Marti Epstein

Ausländer Lieder

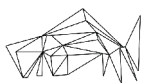
My *Ausländer Lieder* began as a response to the album *This Island* featuring Susan Narucki and Donald Berman. When I asked Susan if we could think of texts that might have the intimate quality I hear in that album, she suggested the poetry of Rose Ausländer, which I didn't know but quickly came to love. They are little gems, evocative and a little mysterious. In order to help me to set them to music, I asked Susan to send me recordings of herself speaking some of the poems. I used these as a reference point; I recommend this practice to any composer writing for a particular singer, especially if the language is not one's own.

The brevity of Ausländer's poems allowed me to organize nine of them into a sort of love story. The poet's somewhat gnomic concern with words might be an aspect of an artist mulling her craft. The cycle begins: "When I say gold I mean the word/When I say word I mean gold."

But there are hints throughout the poems that the poet's concern is not merely artistic but is about personal communication. The "du" of the poems I take to be a lover, for whom words mean different things than they do to the poet. By the end of the set, the lovers seem to have parted, but the words that separated them now connect them, perhaps only in memory: "We shall find each other again/you will write an ending for words begun."

This is my first set of songs written in German, a language I first studied in elementary school, often by singing German children's songs. The vocal lines in this cycle seem to me influenced by the sound of the language, though I suspect to a German they might sound American. I was of course aware of the great tradition of German lieder, but in these short songs I was also thinking in the piano part of the short Schoenberg piano pieces (opus 19) which I used to play. The accompaniment to the final song borrows some counterpoint from a Handel keyboard suite. *Ausländer Lieder* are dedicated to Susan Narucki. I'm very grateful to her for commissioning these songs.

-Scott Wheeler, 2025



Siete Haiku

I was first introduced to Alba Potes and her music in the mid-1990's when I had the good fortune to perform several of her works for voice and ensemble with the New York New Music Ensemble. I have always admired the way in which she treats the poetry that she chooses to set, creating a musical framework that allows what is essential about the poem to unfold organically, with a clear and concentrated focus, and just as quickly, to vanish. Recently, Alba wrote a beautiful series of duets for two sopranos (*TRINOS*) for my project with Kirsten, and I was reminded of her *Siete Haiku* from 1994, in which she sets seven short poems of the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Both voice and piano are woven together in fluid gestures, in songs that reference the decay of empires, a nightingale's consolation, immense ancient night that melts into fragance.

Four Songs by American composers

Donald Berman and I have been performing songs by American composers since 1992; for this evening's program, we have chosen four of them. Samuel Barber's "Music When Soft Voices Die" is a very early work, a simple, straightforward setting of Shelley's poem about precious remnants of memory. Ives' iconic "The Housatonic at Stockbridge" follows the river's journey from its source to its wild merging with the sea, evoking American individualism of the early 20th century. Charles Naginski's "Look Down, Fair Moon" is a haunting setting of Walt Whitman's poem, an indictment of the reality of war. We end with Ives' "West London", Ives' setting of the poem by Matthew Arnold, which contrasts the lives of the rich and the poor in Victorian England, and reasserts the need for universal human dignity.

Making music with friends is a pleasure and a privilege. I thank Kirsten and Donald for taking the journey of tonight's program with me, and I thank all of you for being here.

- Susan Narucki

