



# Grace Notes

**Newsletter of New Amsterdam Singers**

**November 2011**

Jane Barry, Co-Editor  
Nate Mickelson, Co-Editor

Join us for

## **A Child in Winter**

Friday, December 9  
8 p.m.

Sunday December 11  
4 p.m.

*Caroling reception follows  
the Sunday concert!*

Immanuel Lutheran Church  
122 East 88th Street  
at Lexington Avenue

**Purchase tickets:**  
[www.nasingers.org](http://www.nasingers.org)

Program includes  
Bach's *Jesu, meine Freude*,  
Steven Sametz's *Niño de  
Rosas*, David Lang's  
Pulitzer Prize-winning *the  
little match girl passion*, and  
works by Vytautas  
Miškinis, Morten Lauridsen  
and Abbie Betinis

## **Clara Looks at December Program Composers**

Interview by Scott Gillam

**Scott:** The Latvian composer Vytautas Miškinis is one that few in our audience will have heard of. How did you happen to encounter him?

**Clara:** I actually heard his "Cantate Domino" for the first time in Cuba when NAS was on tour. It was sung by a very good professional choir. I immediately knew it was something I'd like to do with NAS, but it took a good while to track down the source of the piece.

**Scott:** We felt Abbie Betinis's personal appeal when she spoke to our audience last season. Having programmed her work in each of the last four seasons, what has drawn you to this composer from a musical standpoint?

**Clara:** I just find that she has an interesting compositional voice, and the texts she uses are varied and well matched to the music. I first heard her "Carmina mei cordis" when our former assistant conductor David Rentz and his group, C4, performed it. Our chamber chorus performed it the next year. Since then she and I have been in close contact. Last spring she stayed in my apartment when she came from Minnesota for NAS's performance of her "Long Time Trav'ling."

**Scott:** As you have pointed out, Morten Lauridsen has now eclipsed Randall Thompson as the most performed American choral composer. Why do you think Lauridsen is so popular with today's audiences?

**Clara:** This particular piece, "O magnum mysterium," is appealing both to audiences and to singers because it is very simple in structure, neither too high nor too low in range, and has just enough dissonance to be "crunchy" yet not too difficult. He writes lovely, arching melodies.

**Scott:** NAS has performed Bach's *Jesu, meine Freude* at least five times since I joined the chorus. What do you find in the piece that repays continued study and performance?

**Clara:** I forget how hard it can be, even though it's not double chorus! The reason the chorus likes to sing Bach is the counterpoint and the richness of the thematic material. Bach has also used an interesting architecture for his 11 movements, a kind of arch form.

**Scott:** In your research on David Lang's Pulitzer-Prize-winning piece, *the little match girl passion*, what did you find that might help the listener better understand this piece?

**Clara:** I recently learned on his web site that Lang is Jewish. He has stated that he always felt on the outside looking in when it came to Christian music. The composer may have felt on more familiar ground using Hans Christian Andersen's story of the poor little match girl as a way of approaching the religious passion. Lang himself has stated that what drew him to the story is that "all its parts—the horror and the beauty—are constantly suffused with their opposites.... There is a kind of naïve equilibrium between suffering and hope."

The 15 movements alternate between Andersen's story and Lang's versions of the words of



## A Portrait of New Singer Sarah Schlein

Interview by Jane Barry

**Jane:** Sarah, you just joined the chorus as a soprano, can you tell me if you have sung with other choruses before? If so, how does NAS differ? How did you come to audition for NAS?

**Sarah:** I have been singing with choruses since elementary school, and I was particularly excited when I was accepted into a madrigals group and student-run a cappella group in high school. In addition, I enjoyed singing with my a cappella group in college, especially because it was important for me to have a hobby outside of my academic classes. While I sang with several groups after college, I didn't find the right fit until I auditioned for NAS in August 2011. I was immediately impressed by Clara's decades of experience, and I'm inspired in knowing that many members have been a part of the chorus for such a long time. I'm honored to be part of a group with such a talented conductor and members.

**Jane:** Tell us about where you grew up and whether your family was involved with music and where and what you studied.

**Sarah:** I grew up in Lexington, a suburb of

Bach's librettist in his *St. Matthew Passion* and its translator. Paul Hillier's Theater of Voices premiered a version *the little match girl passion* for four solo voices, on which the choral version is built. I have not previously done anything so minimalist, so I'm going out on a limb here. The difficulty of the piece lies in its being 35 minutes long with little instrumental support and with complex cross rhythms. Tim Page, one of the judges on the Pulitzer panel, said he had never been so moved by a piece. Since I am steeped in the *St. Matthew Passion*, having sung it in choruses and having heard many performances over the years, Lang's homage to Bach in this piece means a great deal to me.

## Fall Fundraising Auction Opens For Bids Soon!

New Amsterdam Singers launches its Fall 2011 Fundraising Auction on November 21st at [www.biddingforgood.com/nas2011](http://www.biddingforgood.com/nas2011). With more than 50 individual auction items, I'm sure you'll find something you can't do without. And since the auction ends December 15th, you might find perfect holiday gifts, as well!

Featured items include:

- backstage tours of Google and Broadway's new play "Seminar"
- tickets to the New York Philharmonic and dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera
- a home-cooked gourmet dinner for 8 prepared by NAS master chef John Duncan
- gift certificates to Sava Day Spa, New York Health & Racquet Club, Pure Yoga and the 92nd Street Y
- lessons with world-class musicians, artists, swashbucklers and genealogists
- gift certificates for meals at top restaurants in New York City and the surrounding area, and much more.

Every dollar we raise through the auction goes directly to supporting our concert programs and commissions for new music by emerging composers. Check out a preview of the auction today at [www.biddingforgood.com/nas2011](http://www.biddingforgood.com/nas2011).

Boston. Music was a significant part of childhood, especially because my grandfather, Irving Schlein, was a conductor, composer, and pianist on Broadway. I took piano lessons for about 10 years and enjoyed playing pieces like 'Claire de Lune' and Arabesque' by Debussy. Also, my father has a beautiful bass voice, and some of my earliest memories are of harmonizing with him while listening to the radio.

**Jane:** Besides your interest in music, tell us about the work you do and other activities that interest you.

**Sarah:** I am a 7th grade English teacher, and I'm currently creating an interdisciplinary masters program at Teachers College that focuses on incorporating social justice into an English curriculum. I also swim laps on regular basis and take a weekly water class. I love spending time in my UWS neighborhood, especially Riverside Park and Central Park.

**Jane:** Could you say a few words about your plans for the future (where do you want to be in 5 years?)

**Sarah:** Simply stated, I can't wait to fall in love, get married, and start a family.

## Being Max Blum: An Interview With Our New Assistant Conductor

Interview by Jane Barry

**Jane:** Max, you've just joined NAS as our Assistant Conductor. Could you tell us about how you got interested in choral conducting?

**Max:** I think once I was accepted by Yale for college, the rest was inevitable. I'd sung in my high school choir and in musicals, but the piano had always been my main priority. Then, in college, I was exposed to the amazing choral culture at Yale. I joined the Glee Club, sang in and eventually directed a pop/rock a cappella group, participated in recital choruses for the graduate choral conducting students (of which I would eventually become one), and got to be a part of a few huge concerts with famous guest conductors. With so much exposure to different choral leadership styles, rehearsal methods, and repertoire, I quickly started to realize that I had a lot of my own ideas, and I wanted to try leading choirs myself. That urge only got stronger as college went on; so applied to grad school, went, and here I am!

**Jane:** Where did you grow up and how did your childhood experience and education steer your career choice?

**Max:** I grew up in Chappaqua, New York. The school system there has a strong music program, in which I was pretty thoroughly involved, but my piano teacher, a man named Timothy Vernon, had a much greater effect on me. I studied with him all the way from kindergarten through high school, and also sang with him in the junior choir at our church, where he was the music director. He was an excellent musician, and at least as importantly, a patient and nourishing teacher, and warm, welcoming man. When I was younger, he patiently taught me without pushing too hard, waiting for music to turn from a chore into a passion. It's really because of him that I ultimately loved music enough to pursue it as a career.

**Jane:** It's educational for us to learn different methods of warming up and learning our parts. How did you develop your way of doing this?

**Max:** My warm-up and teaching methods are still developing, but I usually just learn by example and take note when I think another conductor does something that works well--whether it's a specific exercise, a word or phrase that gets singers to produce good sound, a nice nonsense syllable for singing notes without words--anything. There are many helpful books, too. For example, the Robert Shaw Reader has a lot of interesting stuff about both warming up and learning music.

**Jane:** Who are your conducting role models? What are your future goals and dreams for conducting?

**Max:** Jeff Douma, who is the conductor of the Yale Glee Club and was one of my teachers over the past two years, is probably my greatest role model in conducting. He's just a generally well-rounded conductor: His gesture is musical and nuanced, but clear and clean; his rehearsals are



efficient, but paced well; and his demeanor is professional and mature at the same time as being friendly and fun. The result is that he's just a really effective choral conductor, capable of getting both professional and amateur singers through really tough musical (as well as logistical) challenges. Whether at a community choir, a university, or a high school, I just want to make great music with singers who are excited enough to give it their all.



Paul Parsekian (in purple on the left side of the group) led a group of singers on a morning hike to tip of Anthony's Nose.

### **Extrachoricular Activities: Garrison in the Fall**

by Nate Mickelson

Singers, friends and families, gathered at the Longstreth's Garrison home this past September 24th for an afternoon of conversation, games, food and drink, and stunning views of early fall foliage along the Hudson River. The now annual Outing provides a wonderful opportunity to renew old friendships and for getting to know each other on a less formal basis. Led by Paul Parsekian, an intrepid group started the day off with a hike along the Appalachian Trail. Though we took some detours along the way, the view from Anthony's Nose (see the picture above) and the camaraderie of the hike were more than worth the effort. The chorus thanks the Longstreths for their generosity in hosting the event and all the singers and guests who contributed to the tremendous pot luck and made the day so enjoyable for everyone!