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Louis Karchin

TO THE SUN AND STARS

Vocal Music (1992-2012)

- American Visions** (25:19)
- 1) I. Who are you, Grand Canyon? (18:14)
- 2) II. Requiem for Challenger (7:03)
Thomas Meglioranza, baritone
Orchestra of the League of Composers
Louis Karchin, conductor
- 3) **To the Sun** (3:01)
Mary Mackenzie, soprano
Eric Sedgwick, piano
- 4) **To the Stars** (4:22)
Ekmeles
- The Gods of Winter** (16:11)
- 5) I. Veterans' Cemetery (5:25)
- 6) II. The Gods of Winter (10:43)
Thomas Meglioranza, baritone
Da Capo Chamber Players
Louis Karchin, conductor
- 7) "A Way Separate..." (8:30)
Sharon Harms, soprano
Da Capo Chamber Players

Orchestra of the League of Composers

Louis Karchin, Music Director

Violin

Aaron Boyd, Concertmaster

Renee Jolles, Associate concertmaster

Caroline Eva Chin

Esther Noh

Deborah Wong, Principal second violin

David Fulmer

Andrea Schultz

Cyrus Stevens

Viola

Lois Martin, Principal

Stephanie Griffin

Lih-wen Ting

Oboe

Jacqueline Leclair

Ekmeles

Mary Mackenzie, soprano, Rachel Calloway, mezzo-soprano,
Patrick Fennig, countertenor, Eric Dudley, tenor, Jeffrey Gavett, baritone and director,
and Steven Hrycelak, bass

Da Capo Chamber Players

Patricia Spencer, flute; Meighan Stoops, clarinet; Curtis Macomber, violin

James Wilson, cello; Blair McMillen, piano

Guest artists of the Da Capo Chamber Players for *The Gods of Winter*:

Miranda Cuckson, violin; Joseph Anderer, French horn; Alex Lipowski, percussion

Cello

Christopher Finckel, Principal

Jeremiah Campbell

Caroline Stinson

Contrabass

Lewis Paer, Principal

Kevin Weng-Yew Mayner

Flute

Sue Ann Kahn

Jayn Rosenfeld

Clarinet

Benjamin Fingland

Virgil Blackwell

Bassoon

Thomas Sefcovic

Gilbert Dejean

Horn

Joseph Anderer

David Byrd-Marrow

Trumpet

Wayne Dumaine

Joshua Frank

Trombone

Jonathan Greenberg

Percussion

Matthew Gold

Alex Lipowski

Orchestra contractor

Sue Ann Kahn



At the forefront of new music in America for more than forty years, the internationally acclaimed **Da Capo Chamber Players** is one of the world's pre-eminent small ensembles devoted to the creation and advocacy of contemporary classical music. Founded in 1970, the group went on to win the Walter W. Naumburg Chamber Music Award, and has since commissioned scores of new works by such composers as Joan Tower, John Harbison, Shulamit Ran, Philip Glass, Mohammed Fairouz, Milton Babbitt, Shirish Korde, David Lang, and countless others. In addition to a high profile subscription series in its home city of New York, the group has toured extensively throughout the US and abroad. In 2010, NPR named Da Capo's CD, Chamber Music of Chinary Ung (Bridge Records), as one of the "5 best contemporary classical CDs of the year."

www.dacapochamberplayers.org

In this first recording with the Orchestra of the League of Composers, Louis Karchin appears in a double role, as conductor and composer. Karchin has in recent years deployed his considerable lyric gifts to the composition of vocal works, and several are presented here. They show his increasing concentration on dramatic text declamation, an interest that is also vividly present in his operas. Now he presents us with his own unique realization of his own works.

Today it is taken for granted that a composer like Karchin would certainly conduct or play his own music, and indeed for most of our past history this state of affairs has obtained. But after the great early-20th-century revolutions in compositional practice, it had become quite common for the functions of composer and performer to be separated. In this dispensation the composer becomes a bystander in the realization of his ideas, and can only influence the performance of his music through intermediaries. Now after a period in which the non-performing composer was a sizable fraction of the composing population, the trend seems reversed and the performing composer is back.

Here, with Karchin as conductor we can be certain that we will hear what Karchin the composer has truly intended. Now it is often the case that as a work leaves its maker and enters into a performance life of its own, other interpretations than that of its author may acquire their own artistic validity. But it is surely essential that we have, as we do here, the very thoughts of the originator, preserved as a guide to others.

Karchin has also gone beyond the advocacy of his own music, since in his work both as conductor and program planner with the League-ISCAM and other new music organizations he has championed the work of many other composers. Here he

manifests that same generosity of spirit -- in the support of other composers -- that informs his music.

Charles Wuorinen

I have known Louis Karchin for over three decades, and what initially attracted me to his work has remained a constant, and grown ever more rewarding. Karchin has at times been typecast as a “Modernist” or even (when such terms were more current than now) an “Uptown” composer, but it’s now clear he is quite free of these stereotypes. Despite being a professor (at NYU his entire career) and educated at Eastman and Harvard, he has never been a composer to privilege the head over the heart. Instead, his music brings his formidable intellect and musicality in service of a highly expressive, indeed visionary project.

While Karchin’s instrumental music may have staked out his profile, it is now clear that his vocal music has been a constant and substantial part of his output. This disc finally presents his vocal music as an integral program, covering works from 1992-2012. In these twenty years, it becomes clear that:

1. Karchin understands Rule #1 of composing for voice, i.e. it is a different instrument from all others. While his vocal lines are demanding, they always are rooted in a strong harmonic context, and their shape is driven by more consonant melodic intervals, no matter how ornate the figuration.
2. His dramatic musical instincts (already evident in his comic opera *Romulus*), combined with his experience as a conductor, make



The **Orchestra of the League of Composers** presented its debut concert at Miller Theatre on June 10, 2009, in a program of music by Elliott Carter, Christopher Dietz, Julia Wolfe, Charles Wuorinen, and Alvin Singleton. Since its founding, the orchestra has commissioned and premiered nine new works, by Singleton, Jason Treuting, Missy Mazzoli, Arthur Krieger, David Rakowski, Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez, Wang Jie, Keith Fitch, and Suzanne Farrin, and presented eighteen New York or world premieres. A particular focus has been the advocacy of the late works of Elliott Carter. The orchestra also has offered programs celebrating the 90th anniversary of the New York University Music Department and the 75th anniversary of the American Composers Alliance.

Ekmeles is dedicated to the performance of new and rarely-heard works, and gems of the historical avant garde. They have offered the U.S. premieres of works by Beat Furrer, Luigi Nono, Aaron Cassidy, Liza Lim, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, and new commissions by Taylor Brook and Zosha Di Castri. Ekmeles also presented the staged premiere of Christopher Cerrone’s *Invisible Cities*.

Ensemble, and Pierre Boulez's *Improvisations sur Mallarmé No. 1 & 2* for the composer's 85th birthday. Recordings include works by James Primosch and the debut recording of John Harbison's *Songs After Hours* with jazz pianist John Chin.



American soprano **Sharon Harms** is a fearless young performer of works new and old. She has premiered the music of John Eaton, Georg Friedrich Haas, Louis Karchin, Gabriela Ortiz, and Charles Wuorinen, among others. Ms. Harms has held two fellowships at the Tanglewood Music Center, and has been a guest artist at the June in Buffalo Festival and Los Angeles

International New Music Festival. She received a Latin Grammy nomination for Gabriela Ortiz' *Aroma Foliado* with Southwest Chamber Music. Ms. Harms studied at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music with Carol Vaness.

www.sharonharmvoice.com

sure that his vocal music *tells a story* in its unfolding. There are always clear markers (what I'll call "anchors") one can hold onto, in order to appreciate the form and direction of a work. These can be a recurrent motive, a tonal harmonic progression, or a characteristic orchestrational gesture.

3. Finally, though composers who claim allegiance to "classic Modernism" are often pilloried as being too subservient to European norms, on the evidence of this disc Karchin is a quintessentially *American* composer. When one listens to the bold opening gestures of such works as *American Visions* and *Gods of Winter*, one hears a spirit that loves space, great open sounds and the drama of contrasts between large and small, vast and intimate. This is a spirit unafraid to combine clear and simple sounds evocative of the past with those that emerge from contemporary complexity.

American Visions is both an older *and* the newest work on this program. In 1994-95 the composer found himself a neighbor in NYU faculty housing to the visiting Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko (musicians will know him from Shostakovich's setting of his poetry in the 13th Symphony, "Babi Yar"). The two found mutual interests and a friendship quickly blossomed, resulting in Karchin's setting of two poems (translated by Albert Todd with the poet). In 1999 a version for baritone and "Pierrot" sextet was premiered, but Karchin obviously yearned for a vaster palette on which to project the work. That arrived in 2012, when the current version for voice and chamber orchestra was premiered.

Yevtushenko's poetry is grand, fierce, and reckless. Imagery ranges from Che Guevara's cigar to "stone apple pie". It seems the honest response of a foreign visitor overwhelmed by the grandeur of the American landscape, and as a poet who reaches to the "Whitmanesque" tradition as a response. Karchin also rises to this challenge with music of an unashamedly noble rhetoric. Throughout the first song there is a recurrent motive on the line, "Who are you, Grand Canyon?", always the same vocal figure but set in a series of varied harmonic contexts. Towards the end of the poem, the tone shifts suddenly, almost shockingly. As in a film, the camera suddenly focuses on a young girl descending into the Canyon; we discover she is blind. What was vast and impersonal suddenly becomes intimate. Karchin (who has said that the challenge of setting this shift of tone and perspective was the most difficult aspect of the work's composition) returns to a motive first heard with the line "as if, like sunflower seeds, they had pressed into oil cakes", letting it grow now to a noble climax. The "seed" of the image from its first appearance returns as the tiny body of the girl, enveloped in the majesty of the landscape.

"Requiem for Challenger" is a sort of epilogue, far shorter than the preceding movement, and a response to the tragedy of the spacecraft's explosion. It *could* be something of a letdown after the emotional rollercoaster of the previous song, but Karchin pulls out one final grand gesture following the line "...our life is a challenge, Our planet is our common 'Challenger' ". Here he sets slow moving brass against swirling strings, an apotheosis that, for me at least, claims common ground with the Russian poet, as the gesture feels both ur-American and "Shostakovichian".



Thomas Meglioranza was born in Manhattan, grew up in northern New Jersey, and graduated from Grinnell College and the Eastman School of Music. He was a winner of the Walter W. Naumburg, Concert Artists Guild, Franz Schubert/Music of Modernity, and Joy in Singing competitions. He has sung with many of the country's top orchestras including the National Symphony, the LA Philharmonic, Les Violons du Roy, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

He was named one of the "Ten Best Classical Performances of the Year" by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. His operatic roles include Don Giovanni, Fritz in *Die tote Stadt*, Chou En-Lai in *Nixon in China* and Prior Walter in Peter Eötvös' *Angels in America*, as well as Celestus in Louis Karchin's *Romulus*. He is a Visiting Artist at the Longy School of Music of Bard College.



A passionate performer of contemporary music, **Mary Mackenzie** has premiered works by John Harbison, Jonathan Dawe, and Hector Parra, and works closely with young composers to develop and premiere new works for voice. Notable solo appearances include John Harbison's *Closer to My Own Life* with the Albany Symphony, Elliott Carter's *Warble for Lilac Time* with the American Symphony Orchestra, Jean Barraqué's *Chant Après Chant* with the Juilliard Percussion

Over the course of a career spanning more than three decades, composer **Louis Karchin** has amassed a portfolio of over 70 compositions, appeared as conductor with numerous performing ensembles, co-founded several new music groups, including the Chamber Players of the League-ISCM, the Orchestra of the League of Composers, the Washington Square Ensemble, and the Harvard Group for New Music, and overseen the formation of a graduate program in Music Composition at New York University. His works have garnered distinguished honors, including three awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts Awards, and Koussevitzky, Barlow, and Fromm commissions.

Karchin (born Philadelphia, 1951) studied at the Eastman School of Music and Harvard University; his principal teachers included Samuel Adler, Joseph Schwantner, Fred Lerdaahl, Earl Kim, Gunther Schuller, and Leon Kirchner. Additional study included two summers as a Leonard Bernstein Fellow in Composition at the Tanglewood Music Center. He is now Professor of Music at New York University.

He is the author of two operas, *Romulus* (on the Dumas play) and his forthcoming second opera, based on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. His music is published by C. F. Peters Corporation and the American Composers Alliance. Mr. Karchin has been Composer-in-Residence at the Composers' Conference at Wellesley College; Indiana University, the University of Buffalo, and the University of Utah and presented master classes at universities throughout the United States.

Mr. Karchin lives in Short Hills, NJ, with his wife, Julie Sirota Karchin, and their daughters, Marisa and Lindsay.

To the Sun and *To the Stars* (2003) are both settings of Greek Orphic hymns written in the 3rd century CE. The cult from which they derive worshipped Orpheus: this fact alone would attract any composer, but the ecstatic quality of the poetry, in its veneration of animistic nature, closes the deal. Written as epilogues to a larger project, a masque based on the Orpheus legend and centered around Stanley Kunitz's poem *In the Dark House*, the two pieces, were premiered together for the first time only in 2014 although often performed separately prior to then.

In *To the Sun*, Karchin has written a vocal line, which, despite its great range and frequent leaps, sounds utterly idiomatic for the voice. Part of the reason for this is his canny take on harmony. Though the music is chromatic in the sense that it moves through many different regions of varying complexity, it nevertheless feels clearly rooted at any given moment. And though at times the actual pitch-content is neo-triadic and seemingly simple, the arpeggiated piano accompaniment creates a whirling texture that never lets the energy flag. Where you have been, how you've gotten there, and where you seem to be going--all feel right. (To take just one example, at the climactic, "and, harsh to the impious", the music rings out in A major, then suddenly the parallel minor slips underneath, and we move into a realm, that while still open in sound, is far more ambiguous.)

To the Stars is for six-voice a cappella choir, and is more complex in its harmonic language and textural density. Its rhetoric is incantatory, summoning divine forces. I hear it also as a contemporary response to the madrigal tradition. Karchin moves fluently from homophonic passages to those of imitative counterpoint. The music also can open into spacious repetition in its text-setting, such as the passage "as, wand'ring in mid-air" near the work's middle, then snap back into tight syllabic setting. And

there is a clear “anchor” that recurs throughout the work at pivotal arrival-points: a bare perfect fifth of C-G, whose character changes over the course of the piece from darkly foreboding to triumphant.

The Gods of Winter (2007) is a setting of two poems by Dana Gioia. Both deal with the impermanence of life and the poignancy of that fact. The first, “Veterans’ Cemetery”, opens with a grand rhetorical flourish, almost like a peroration at a memorial ceremony, and the serious, subdued martial quality persists throughout the song. (Though subtle, the vocal line’s predominance of rising fourths suggests bugle calls). And though the ensemble is scored only for eight players, Karchin shows his deep knowledge of orchestration so as to produce a truly “orchestral” sound. The eponymous second song begins with a sustained contemplative orchestral passage, a sort of interlude between the two vocal settings. The song itself is both more turbulent *and* contemplative than what has passed before, alternating between storm and calm, just like the imagery of the poem. There’s also a recurrent gesture of a simple tonal progression that again serves as an anchor (a progression from tonic first inversion to subdominant, evocative to me of both Beethoven and Brahms).

A Way Separate... is the earliest work on this program, from 1992. It was commissioned as part of a larger multi-composer project by the University of Rochester Hillel Foundation that commemorated the Holocaust and also honored composer Samuel Adler. The piece is based on the life and work of Hannah Senesh, a Hungarian poet who escaped to Palestine, but then returned to Yugoslavia to rescue fellow Jews from the Nazis. She was captured, tortured, and executed. Karchin’s compact cycle sets a text of Senesh in the center, with two poems written in her voice by the American poet Ruth Whitman.

“A Way Separate....”

Poetry by Ruth Whitman and Hannah Senesh

I.

I think of the pine tree
beside my tent
on the dune
at kibbutz Sdot Yam:

and my blood lifted
with the salty lift of the tide:
now under the pine trees
in a foreign land
I live day and night
with strangers:

I’m a drop of oil on water,
sometimes floating,
sometimes sinking,
but always apart.

–Ruth Whitman

II.

Blessed is the match that burns and kindles fire,
Blessed is the fire that burns in the secret heart.
Blessed are the hearts that know how to stop with honor...
Blessed is the match that burns and kindles fire.

*–Hannah Senesh, translated by
Ruth Whitman*

III.

I am already
the widow of my life:

that the world and I
would join rejoicing:

I chose a way separate
but paved with light,

but now I am
married to solitude,

a promise that I would be
a gift accepted,

sister of death,
a gift that went astray

–Ruth Whitman

*Poems are from The Testing of Hannah Senesh by Ruth Whitman, copyright © 1986.
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profligate March squanderers its wealth,
The world is annihilated and remade
with only us as witnesses.

Briefest of joys, our life together;
this brittle flower twisting towards the light
even as it dies, no more permanent
for being perfect. Time will melt away
triumphant winter; and even your touch
prove the unpossessable jewel of ice.
And vanish like this unseasonable storm
drifting there beyond the windows where even
the cluttered rooftops now lie soft and luminous
like a storybook view of paradise.
Why not believe these suave messengers
of starlight? Morning will make

their brightness blinding, and the noon insist
that only legend saves the beautiful. But if
the light confides how one still winter must
arrive without us, then our eternity
is only this white storm, the whisper
of your breath, the deities of this quiet night.

*From The Gods of Winter, by Dana Gioia. Used with permission of the poet.
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The opening song is a series of vignettes, closely following the imagery of the poem. One of the most notable is tied to the passage “under the pine trees, in a foreign land, I live day and night with strangers”: the music suggests a gentle overlapping of folk songs, perhaps from the kibbutz mentioned at the start of the text. The second poem is a brief prayer, and in keeping with its rhetoric, the music is far more continuous and lyrical. The final song, with its premonitions of the poet’s death, consists of intense outbursts that become increasingly separated and spacious. The gestural language is expressionistic, but favors clear motives, and the harmonies privilege perfect consonances. Even in the formally constricted space of the work, a haunting poignancy emerges.

Robert Carl

Robert Carl is chair of the composition department at the Hartt School, University of Hartford, and is the author of *Terry Riley’s In C* (Oxford University Press).



American Visions

Who are you, Grand Canyon?

By Yevgeny Yevtushenko

A thing
 laminating,
 ever bifurcating,
a thing
 melting away
 from itself,
frightened
 by its own terrible weight,
like a lizard
 hiding its soul from the tourists
beneath the rocks.
A thing
 unimaginably old,
something of the very beginning,
 something of the end,
something
 of Cain and Abel.
Womb of the ages,
 turned inside out,
a sphinx
 whose enigma,
 aired out by time,
unsolved by us,
drips away oblivion.
The body of history,
 not split into chapters,

The Gods of Winter

Veterans' Cemetery

by Dana Gioia

The ceremonies of the day have ceased,
Abandoned to the ragged crow's parade.
The flags unravel in the caterpillar's feast.
The wreaths collapse onto the stones they shade.

How quietly doves gather by the gate
Like souls who have no heaven and no hell.
The patient grass reclaims its lost estate
Where one stone angel stands as sentinel.

The voices whispering in the burning leaves.
Faint and inhuman, what can they desire
When every season feeds upon the past,
And summer's green ignites the autumn's fire?

The afternoon's a single thread of light
Sewn through the tatters of a leafless willow,
As one by one the branches fade from sight,
And time curls up like paper turning yellow.

The Gods of Winter

by Dana Gioia

Storm on storm, snow on drifting snowfall,
shifting its shape, flurrying in moonlight,
bright and ubiquitous,

are the partition in all the pyramids,
the walls of the Kremlin

with the ghost
of Ivan the Terrible in his cowl.

Who are you,
Grand Canyon?

The answer strains.

The rocks struggle.

Each one is a clever devil.

They want to press each other down,

but there are no victors:

all are injured
by the struggle,

all are defeated,
all are pinned down

by the weight of years.

The rocks languish from the senseless combat.

Afterward
they huddle together,

and embrace,
and break apart,

hoarsely wheezing at the end.

Those who ruled in grandeur,
all Macedonians,

Xerxes and Dariuses,
the planters of fear in souls--

fleas
who only seemed to be giants--

what have they become today
in the Grand Canyon?

Red dust

immortally crucified on the stars,

And his widow
began to walk over the ocean
to her American sister-widows.

The Statue of Liberty,
crying the green tears of a mermaid,

tried to reach the cosmos
to save her children,
but could not.

Our life is a challenge.

Our planet is a common "Challenger."

We humiliate her,
frightening each other with bombs.

But could we explode her?
Even by mistake?

Even by accident?
That would be the final mistake,

which could never be undone.

8 March 1986

Translated by Albert C., Todd with the author

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To the Sun

Anonymous, circa 300 A. D. , translated by Apostolos Athanassakis

Hearken, O blessed one, whose eternal eye sees all,
Titan radiant as gold, Hyperion, celestial light,
self-born, untiring, sweet sight to living creatures,

And wounded by its healing beauty,
a blind girl
 down in the Grand Canyon
is,
 Grand Canyon,
 above you.

1972

Grand Canyon. Arizona

Translated by Albert C. Todd

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Requiem for Challenger

By Yevgeny Yevtushenko

This white tragic swan
 of farewell explosion.
This white swan of death
 made from the last breath
 of seven evaporated souls.
shook the gravestones of Arlington,
 the Kremlin stars,
 and the ancient armless statues of Rome.

The already gray
 Pyrenees,
 Caucasus,
 and Everest
now are become even more gray forever.
Gagarin's brotherly shadow
 shuddered,

 in the nostrils of mules.
Who are you, Grand Canyon?
 You are like the Revolution.
Your roaring waterfalls are uncontrollable,
like the rebellion of Spartacus.
Above the shoals of the Colorado
Cliffs--
 like barricades in Paris--
make you young,
 old man.
You
 sail proudly
above the raging torrents
 like the battleship Potemkin
which immortalized a princeling's name.
Sputnik there in shadows.
 blacker than pitch,
is like the flashlight of Che Guevara,
somewhere hiding today. Who are you,
Grand Canyon?
 The image of America.
There are trails like workers'
 and farmers' veins--
they could almost elect you president!
The air of Whitman,
 Robert Frost,
but look around,
 there are chasms beyond chasms.
Hawks in the sky,
 black ravens,
clans of trees,
 grown out above the abyss.

