



WEST VILLAGE CHORALE  
2024 SPRING CONCERT

## STRINGS ATTACHED

SUNDAY, JUNE 2ND, 2024 AT 5:00PM  
JUDSON MEMORIAL CHURCH  
55 WASHINGTON SQUARE SOUTH, NYC

### Program Notes:

When I program concerts, I often start with a general theme—holidays, darkness and light, music from a particular region of the world, social justice—and then I build a program around that theme. Less often, a concert is born from a single piece, which either forms the cornerstone or the centerpiece around which the other music is arranged. For this concert, that piece is David Lang’s *the national anthems*. Though I’ve sung and heard much of Lang’s music, my first encounter with this important and self-scrutinizing work was with the Yale Choral Artists back in 2018. It was added to the concert lineup fairly late in the game, and so I basically had to sight-read it at the first rehearsal. As we were singing these words, meticulously arranged and gradually increasing in their stinging potency, I felt my eyes welling up and tears running down my cheeks. I couldn’t explain how or why this piece gripped me, but I knew I wanted to conduct it one day. Not long after, I encountered Jake Runestad’s gorgeous *The Hope of Loving*, and the idea of a concert combining these two pieces, both for choir and string quartet, became imprinted on my mind.

The four choral pieces on this program each explore a different aspect of nature and our interaction with the Earth. Lang’s *the national anthems* highlights some of the ways we humans claim nature as our own, often exploiting it as a sign of power or superiority. My piece, *So Also We Sing* (being premiered this afternoon) explores both the remote isolation and the natural beauty of my home state of Maine. Alex Berko’s *Sacred Place* takes the format of a Jewish prayer service, replacing most of the religious texts with poetry or writings about nature, effectively offering up praise to this most precious of worlds. And Jake Runestad’s *The Hope of Loving* uses metaphors about nature to describe our relationship with and dependency on love.

Each of these four pieces (along with Caroline Shaw’s hypnotic *Entr’acte*) treat the use of string instruments in a different, often unexpected way, bringing dramatic colors and textures to already rich vocal writing. I’m also pleased that both my piece and Alex Berko’s *Sacred Place* prominently feature piano, allowing our beloved pianist Elena Belli to contribute with her tremendous musicality and expression. This program has been very special to prepare, and I am especially grateful to the five instrumentalists who are sharing the stage with us, along with our brilliant assistant conductor Rong Zhang, who will be conducting the premiere of my piece.

- Colin Britt

### David Lang: *the national anthems*

Every country has a history—how it came to be, how its wars were won or lost, how strong its people are, or how proud, or how sad. We group ourselves into nations, but it has never really been clear to me what that means, or what we get out of it. Are we grouped together because we believe something together and are proud of associating with others who believe the same way? Or are we grouped together because our ancestors found themselves pushed onto a piece of land by people who didn’t want them on theirs? It seems that all nations have some bright periods and some dark periods in their past. Building a national myth out of our bright memories probably creates a different character than if we build one out of the dark.

## “Strings Attached” Program notes (cont’d)

I had the idea that if I looked carefully at every national anthem I might be able to identify something that everyone in the world could agree on. If I could take just one hopeful sentence from the national anthem of every nation in the world I might be able to make a kind of meta-anthem of the things that we all share. I started combing through the anthems, pulling out from each the sentence that seemed to me the most committed. What I found, to my shock and surprise, was that within almost every anthem is a bloody, war-like, tragic core, in which we cover up our deep fears of losing our freedoms with waves of aggression and bravado.

At first I didn’t know what to do with this text. I didn’t want to make a piece that was aggressive, or angry, or ironic. Instead, I read and re-read the meta-anthem I had made until another thought became clear to me. Hiding in every national anthem is the recognition that we are insecure about our freedoms, that freedom is fragile, and delicate, and easy to lose. Maybe an anthem is a memory informing a kind of prayer, a heartfelt plea:

*There was a time when we were forced to live in chains.  
Please don’t make us live in chains again.  
—David Lang*

### **Colin Britt: So Also We Sing**

In 2019, I had the honor of being commissioned to write a cantata-length work for the state of Maine bicentennial celebration, which was to be observed on March 15, 2020 (more on that later). Having grown up in Lewiston-Auburn, a mill town hit pretty hard by deindustrialization in the 20th century and surrounded by the natural beauty (and isolation) of the state, I knew I wanted to write something that could encapsulate those qualities. With some help from my literary-minded mother, I compiled four poems by three Maine authors. The first and last movement are poems by Wes McNair, a former poet laureate of the state; the first, “Driving North in Winter,” perfectly portrays the sense of driving through the endless darkness I feel when I drive to see my parents, while the last, “The Life,” captures a moment of serenity in the breathless natural beauty of Maine. The middle movement is a combination of two texts; the first, an early 20th century French poem by Joseph-Amedée Girouard that translates to “Song of the Drones,” depicts the daily march of child workers to the textile mills at the turn of the last century, while the second, by poet Susann Pelletier, explores the complex merging of pride and sorrow felt by many about their immigrant parents who toiled in unimaginable conditions to build a new life for their families.

I worked for many weeks to craft this piece (which is originally scored for full orchestra), and in January 2020 I completed the final draft and sent it off to the performers. As March 15<sup>th</sup> approached, I heard regular updates from singers and answered questions from instrumentalists about playing techniques, including a shoe-tapping pattern you’ll hear during the “Bates Mill Reel” that opens the second movement. And then of course, like everything else in the world, this performance was lost—first, postponed to later in 2020, and then finally permanently canceled. There was a brief possibility of having a performance with choir and string quartet (from which the present arrangement is based), but that too never came to fruition. So I am *incredibly* grateful to Rong Zhang, Elena Belli, our string players, and the singers of the West Village Chorale for finally bringing this piece to life. I’m really proud of this one, and I’m humbled and honored to finally hear the premiere.

*—Colin Britt*

### **Caroline Shaw: Entr’acte**

*Entr’acte* was written in 2011 after hearing the Brentano Quartet play Haydn’s Op. 77 No. 2 — with their spare and soulful shift to the D-flat major trio in the minuet. It is structured like a minuet and trio, riffing on that classical form but taking it a little further. I love the way some music (like the minuets of Op. 77) suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice’s looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, technicolor transition.

*—Caroline Shaw*

## “Strings Attached” Program notes (cont’d)

### Alex Berko: *Sacred Place*

*Sacred Place* is an ecological service that connects the old with the new, the sacred with the secular, and the individual with their community. The outline of the work is a Jewish service. However, rather than Jewish prayers, the text is made up of various writers and thinkers who speak of the environment as a place of safety, comfort, and beauty. Written for SATB choir, piano, violin, and cello, the six-movement piece is at times a meditation and at times an impassioned prayer for the world we inhabit and share.

While discussing this new work for *Conspirare*, Craig [Hella Johnson] and I spoke about many ideas surrounding themes of community, nature, compassion, and healing. He expressed interest in creating a sonic space that united the singers and audience in collective feelings of compassion and grief. This idea resonated with me and these communal aspects brought to mind the concept of a liturgical service.

Many composers throughout history have written liturgical works such as masses, requiems, and cantatas. Many of these settings come from Christian liturgy with text in Latin. There are also many secular masses that are not written specifically for a liturgical purpose nor have text exclusively in Latin. In very recent years, composers such as Sarah Kirkland Snider (*Mass the Endangered*) and Carlos Simon (*Requiem for the Enslaved*) have further expanded these forms by weaving in elements of social justice.

I was inspired by my contemporaries to combine the old with the new and bring a piece of my identity and tradition into this work. As a result, rather than using the Christian liturgy, “*Sacred Place*” is based on the Jewish service. Additionally, while each movement is titled after a different pillar of a Jewish service, none of the text is in Hebrew. Instead, I stitched together the writings of several American environmentalists and poets who have spoken about their relationship with the earth.

“*Sacred Place*” is broken into 6 movements: “*Opening Prayer*”, “*Amidah*”, “*Shema*”, “*Mi Sheberach*”, “*Kaddish*”, and “*Closing Prayer*”.

“*Opening Prayer*” and “*Closing Prayer*” use the same serene Wendell Berry passage from the poem “*The Porch Over the River*”. “*Amidah*” (to stand) uses snippets of a letter written by John Muir to Theodore Roosevelt asking him to meet at Yosemite National Park. Muir pleads Roosevelt to “stand” with him in preserving this land. “*Shema*” (to listen) uses a poem by William Stafford who urges us to listen to what the earth is saying. “*Mi Sheberach*” (a prayer for the sick) is the only English translation of the Hebrew prayer in the work. In the Jewish service, the *Mi Sheberach* is often the emotional peak as it asks for the congregation to pray “for those in need of healing”. (There is a beautiful Debbie Friedman version of the song that is often sung.) I view this movement as a call to action for us as inhabitants of the earth to do our part to heal it. Finally, “*Kaddish*” (a prayer for the dead) uses a very short line from the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore speaking about the sunset as a metaphor for remembering those who are no longer with us.

The title “*Sacred Place*” holds many meanings. Each writer that I have chosen views the earth as sacred. They speak of us as inhabitants, as visitors. Without the earth, there is no us. Another dimension is the experience that the listener has while hearing the piece live. It is not a coincidence that a piece framed in a Jewish service was premiered in a Lutheran church. I find it beautiful that the audience will be entering one sacred space with its own history and religious traditions and experiencing elements of another culture’s service. There is a deep unifying power in collective listening that transcends a single person or a single group’s traditions. I am thinking about the concept of the “service” in the broadest sense: coming together to sit, listen, breathe, and understand. The audience is entering a sacred space within themselves, silently resonating with those around them.

—Alex Berko

## **“Strings Attached” Program notes (cont’d)**

### **Jake Runestad: The Hope of Loving**

“How will you ever find peace unless you yield to love?”

With all of the inequality, violence, and pain in our world, I continue to dwell on the importance and impact of love—love shown to others and love shown to oneself. When considering the focus for this Seraphic Fire commission, I didn’t necessarily choose the topic of love, it was a calling.

I am a hoarder of poetry and one of my favorite collections is “Love Poems From God”—mystical poems by Daniel Ladinsky inspired by famous writers from around the world. This book is a composer’s dream with colorful, powerful, and succinct writings that talk of living fully, deep spirituality, self-contemplation, and love. When starting my work on this new composition, I opened Ladinsky’s book to find a treasure trove of quaint parables and sage advice for us all as we seek meaning in our human condition. “The Hope of Loving” uses a selection of writings inspired by spiritual mystics throughout history to explore the idea of love and its manifestation in our lives.

The work begins with the string quartet playing a descending sequence of a single musical interval—the perfect fourth. This interval appears throughout the work as a musical motive but also a sign post; acting as a sort of character or embodiment of love. The string quartet, soloists, and chorus serve equal roles throughout the work in bringing these mystical words to life. In each of the six movements, I have endeavored to capture various ways we, as humans, respond to and act on our idea of love; hopefully creating opportunities for introspection and realization.

Love is our most valuable resource, our most precious possession, our doorway into fostering compassion. May you consider these texts and this music with an open mind and ask yourself, “to whom can I give more love in my life?” For it is through love, both given and received, that our world can change.

*–Jake Runestad*