

Cultural Wasteland presents

Letters from New York:



The Music of Chris DeBlasio

with

Heather Gallagher, mezzo-soprano , Paul Soper, baritone
and James Myers, pianist



September 11th @2pm

First Church Boston
66 Marlborough Street in Boston

For tickets visit www.LiveInHG.com/events

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Letters from New York: The Music of Chris DeBlasio

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Paul Soper, baritone
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Written by Heather Gallagher
with Peter Schiepers, dramaturg

From the memories of
Virginia Lowery,
Harry Huff,
William Berger

d the dissertation, “An Introduction to the life and the songs of composer
Chris DeBlasio with special emphasis on his cycle,
All the Way Through Evening,
by Dr. Brian Bonin.

With the poetry of
Ilsa Gilbert
Perry Brass
and
Elizabeth Bishop

Presented at First Church Boston, September 11th, 2022

Program:

Villagers

Poetry by Ilsa Gilbert and Perry Brass
Heather Gallagher, mezzo-soprano

Paris
The Heart Does Not Care
Butcher
Rushes
Lyric 4

To a Friendly Neighbor

Words and music by Chris DeBlasio
Paul Soper, baritone

In Endless Ascentz

Poetry by Elizabeth Bishop
Heather Gallagher, mezzo-soprano

Anaphora
Insomnia
Sonnet (1928)
Letter to New York

All the Way Through Evening

Poetry by Perry Brass
Paul Soper, baritone

The Disappearance of Light
The Train Station
An Elegy to Paul Jacobs
Poussin
Walt Whitman in 1989

Life in The World Never to Come:

The Meaning of the Music of Chris De Blasio

by Peter Schiepers, Dramaturg

Those who know of the work of Chris DeBlasio likely know him through his song, *Walt Whitman in 1989*. That being said, many of the concert going public are largely unfamiliar with his work. Despite his noteworthy accomplishment of composing the song cycle *All the Way Through Evening* that formed an iconic part of the *AIDS Quilt Songbook*, this collection of music served as a musical commentary on the situation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Nevertheless, The purpose of tonight's performance is to prove that his work is more than just a footnote to the 80's Aids crisis. To best understand De Blasio's music, it requires some deeper thinking and reflection. By reviving in concert *In Endless Ascent* and *Villagers*, not only is a greater repertoire of his work being exposed, but also a deeper awareness and opportunity to reflect on what his music has to offer us today and how it provides new context to our current predicament such as COVID-19, protracted economic crisis, and an increasingly fragile global ecosystem. De Blasio's music may strike us as being from a totally alien reality, especially for many struggling in the arts, it seems like an Elysium compared to the increasingly harsh economic reality of eking out a living in America's metropoli. The song cycles of tonight's program, *Letters from New York*, provides not only an insight into the historic milieu of the 80's New York art scene but will permit us to rethink De Blasio's work anew within our current world situation.

From a philosophical perspective, I can only think of the example established by Martin Heidegger in his 1955 commemorative address for the composer Conradin Kreutzer's 175th anniversary. Heidegger stated that the memorial of the composer will always be an opportunity to rethink, by accepting the process to rethink the life of the composer, we commence to start thinking at all. Heidegger elaborates that the composer lives on by how their music forms and keeps our sense of culture and place intact. This cannot be reduced as a mere preservation of a given ethnic group, circle of friends, or a swinging art's scene. In Heidegger's address, the deeper value of art begins when we see it provide answers to the growing contingency of a world continuously becoming unmoored and estranged from us as a human race. We find this principle most at work from how De Blasio brings a profound and evocative score to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, one of America's most

celebrated mid-20th century poets and prominent literary voice. His reworking of her poetry renews her description of New York, her romantic disposition (she was a lesbian icon), and to push her lyrics a little further and reimagine a new aesthetic space for them. A striking example would be the song *Anaphora*, which evokes a sentiment that for many people is called one's life-world – the sense of how we live and relate our sense of subjectivity that enables us to speak meaningfully of the human environment.

The role of a “life-world” encountered in the music of De Blasio is that we are witness to a world that is no longer possible. To borrow some language from contemporary philosophy, there are three major ethical theories on the role of personhood and society. The first is found in Paul Ricoeur's series of lectures *Soi-Même Comme un Autre*, which describes a theory of the “narrative self”, that is fashioned from the unique use of a grammatical “I”. The “I” becomes a pole of our sense of self. However, since everyone is an “I”, this entails linguistic paradoxes of unique reference because “I”, as a pronoun, is an object of anybody else. De Blasio plays with this paradox of the “I” sentimentality of *Paris* to the tongue-in-cheek *Butcher* from *Villagers*. Each of these songs constantly allows us to imagine ourselves in different perspectives. The second theory of personhood can be found in Alisdair McIntyre's elaboration of a theory of “life plan”, whose goal is to develop human virtue in a robust community founded upon tradition, as elaborated in his work *After Virtue*. Such a view assumes the false consistency of how stable community values can always be a sure guide to well-being, whereas the crisis of such ritual as seen in *Butcher*, from the narrator whose inability to vibe in her setting is the music of her husband.

The third theory of personhood is Michel Foucault's *souci-de-soi*, which was elaborated in his three volume *History of Sexuality*. The meaning of Foucault's theory was to address how every social order requires the construction and maintenance of our sense of pleasure - sexuality is the prime example of how society regulates pleasure. Of course, as Michel Foucault famously died of HIV/AIDS in 1984, convinced months before his death that it was only a social construct of a repressive medical apparatus. We can find in *The Heart does no Care* an expression of the fragility of love and that of our bodies, which become the locus of our inability to manage and regulate ourselves.

The consequence of ruptured life-worlds is the role of Pandemics that elicit the fragility of the social order. This was clearly the case in the 80's with Ronald Reagan and the continuing social dislocation experienced from Donald Trump's recent time as president. In the wake of the 80's and the late 2010's, De Blasio's work reminds us of a world that is no longer possible. This was the case of how HIV/AIDS drastically reconstructed homosexual identity, gradual erosion of urban artist communities (gentrification, inflation, speculation on real-estate). In the 80's and for our time, we are facing the massive erosion of civil rights and social progress in the preservation of the social welfare state and other mechanisms that had attempted to create more equitable access to healthcare, education, housing, which will never be restored, much less preserved in the coming decades. The failure to deal with HIV/AIDS and the failure to deal with COVID-19 can only be explained as the failure of a for-profit healthcare system and the role of the state to insure the endless accumulation of capital at the expense of the health and safety of millions of workers and the world's populace. Ultimately, The songs that are part of *Letters from New York*, give us the profound courage to accept the world that is never to come. It is only by accepting such a point of departure do we find the hope of being able to make anew the world and life we would hope to share with each other and De Blasio's music makes a pleasant contribution to the new songbook for such a period to come.

Biographies



HEATHER GALLAGHER (MEZZO-SOPRANO, CREATOR)

Ms. Gallagher's voice and dramatic work has been praised as "standout", "vivid" and "radiant" by many publications including the Boston Globe, the Miami Herald, the Boston Musical Intelligencer and Boston Classical Review. Recent engagements include the grammy nominated recording of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Soraya, Boston Modern Orchestra

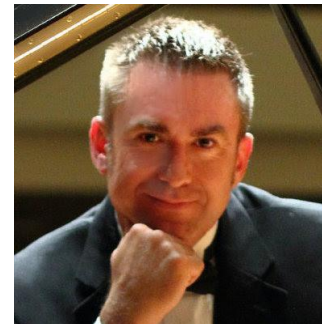
Project, conducted by Gil Rose) the world premiere of *The Nefarious, Immoral but Highly Profitable Enterprise of Mr. Burke and Mr. Hare* (Margaret, BLO), *Carmen* (Mercedes; Carmen cover, dir Calixto Bieito/Rechi, BLO) and *Patience* (Lady Saphir, Odyssey Opera) *Trouble in Tahiti* (Dinah, Metrowest Opera), the New England premiere of Mohammed Fairouz's *Sumeida's Song* (Asakir, BOC) and the title role in *Carmen* with Metrowest Opera. Visit www.LiveInHG.com



PAUL SOPER, BARITONE, is delighted to be making his debut with Cultural Wasteland. He made his operatic debut with Houston Grand Opera as the Innkeeper in *Manon* and has sung principal and comprimario roles with Boston Lyric Opera, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Glimmerglass Opera, Opera Naples (FL) and the National Touring Company of New York City Opera.

Known for his wide range of repertoire, recent seasons include the title role of Rachmaninoff's *Aleko* with Commonwealth Lyric Theater, the *Verdi Requiem* with the Paul Madore Chorale, Bach's *St. John Passion* with the Pioneer Valley Symphony and *St.*

Matthew Passion with Gulfshore Opera. This past fall Mr. Soper made his Enigma Chamber Opera of Boston debut as the Abbott in the critically acclaimed production of Benjamin Britten's *Curlew River*. Theater credits include Judge Turpin in *Sweeney Todd* with Lyric Stage Company, Emile DeBecque in *South Pacific* with Seacoast Repertory Theater, and Signor Naccarrelli in *The Light in the Piazza* with Nextdoor Theater. Mr. Soper has also been a frequent guest with the Boston Bel Canto Opera, Chamber Orchestra of Boston, Charleston Chamber Opera, Falmouth Chorale, Cape Cod Opera, Opera Providence, Connecticut Early Music Festival, Intermezzo Opera and the Seaglass Theater Company. Paul is also an alumni of Boston's former educational outreach, improvisational Opera-to-Go Company. Twice a Leonard Bernstein Fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, Mr. Soper currently is a Choral Fellow at the historic Old South Church.



JAMES MYERS (PIANIST, COACH)

A native of Portland, Oregon, keyboardist **James J. Myers** enjoys a dynamic career on three continents as vocal coach, recitalist, composer and clinician. His sublime performances have reached millions in renowned venues including King's College Cambridge, England; Hannover's Beethovensaal, Germany; the Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia, Valencia,

Spain; Musée-Château d'Annecy, France; Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, Portland, Oregon; Benaroya Hall, Seattle; Zipper Hall in Los Angeles; and the DiMenna Center, New York City. Esteemed projects include Strauss's *Vier letzte Lieder* with Christine Brewer, *In the Penal Colony* with composer Philip Glass, *Star Trek* concerts with actors John de Lancie and Robert Picardo, and *Indie Songs* with Renée Fleming at Denver's Center for the Performing Arts. With John Adams and Marin

Also he was featured at the synthesizer for Opera Colorado's Naxos recording of *Nixon in China*. He's been privileged sharing stages with artistic luminaries including Frederica von Stade, Nadine Sierra, Morris Robinson, Thomas Hampson, composers Tom Cipullo and Jake Heggie, the late Charity Tillemann-Dick and Carol Neblett, and conductors Bernard Labadie, Matthew Halls, Peter Oundjian, David Angus and Marvin Hamlisch. In masterclasses he's joined forces with Jane Eaglen, Steven Isserlis, Sylvia McNair, John Perry, Abby Simon, Soulima Stravinsky, Nelita True, Roger Vignoles, Wagnerian Linda Watson, and the late Jan DeGaetani and Zvi Zeitlin.

Through ten years in Boston, James has enjoyed a long affiliation with Boston Lyric Opera as Lecturer and Coach/Pianist. In addition to presenting nearly all of BLO's pre-performance lectures,

he's designed multimedia exhibition lectures for sold out audiences, including *Music of Matisse*, *Goya: Tonadilla and Zarzuela*, *World Architecture and Acoustics*, and *Viennese Musical Modernism of Klimt and Schiele* through invitations of the Museum of Fine Arts. He prepared BLO's *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Rigoletto*, *Die Zauberflöte*, and *Kátya Kabanová*, among others. In a contemporary vein he's coached *Flight* by Jonathan Dove, Ward's *The Crucible*, *Ours* by Estacio, Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*, and the children's opera *El Gato con Botas* by Xavier Montsalvatge. James is Assistant Professor of Opera and Voice at Boston Conservatory at Berklee where he's prepared Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, *The Consul* by Menotti, Britten's *Turn of the Screw*, and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. He's Director of Music and Organist at Union Congregational Church south of Boston, and savors projects with a range of arts organizations including Classical Singer, National Association of Teachers of Singing, Tanglewood Festival Chorus, Cultural Wasteland, MassOpera, Midsummer Opera, Beacon Hill Seminars, Opera On Tap, and Percussia in New York. In demand as adjudicator and clinician, he's led masterclasses at academic institutions nation-wide, including Virginia Tech School of Music, Fuller Theological Seminary, Louisiana State University, Texas A & M Corpus

Christi, and University of Hawaii. He manages a large private vocal coaching studio; his students have secured roles at Staatsoper Berlin and Vienna, Bregenz, Glimmerglass, L.A. Opera, Santa Fe, Merola, Sarasota and Central City, and won scholarships to Juilliard, Indiana, Curtis and Eastman



PETER SCHIEPERS (DRAMATURG)

Peter Schiepers was Valedictorian of his graduating class of the Putney School 2011 where he specialized in Art and Sculpture. He continued his education at the College of the Holy Cross where he was the winner of the Reverend F. Hardigan Prize for his Essay on Religion. Mr. Schiepers graduated from the College

of the Holy Cross with a degree in Philosophy and German, magna cum laude with honors in 2017. The title of his thesis was The History of Intentionality in Philosophy and Logic and is available per request from Holy Cross. Mr. Schiepers is looking forward to continuing his education with a graduate degree in Logic and Computer Science. A dual citizen of the United States and Belgium, Mr. Schiepers is fluent in German, French and Wallon, and is proficient in Spanish and Latin. In his spare time he enjoys studying philosophy, music, logic and learning Romanian and Italian.



CHRIS DEBLASIO, COMPOSER

For composer Chris DeBlasio, the omnipresence of HIV/AIDS during the final years of his life helped to channel his creative energies into a unique compositional voice. At a time when certain elements of the New York music scene rewarded atonality and musical experimentation, DeBlasio pursued a lyrically tonal, theatrically-informed style in the company of composers such as Jake Heggie and Ricky Ian Gordon. Unfortunately, his death in 1993 at age thirty-four limited the growing awareness of his compositions in the greater artistic community and robbed him of the success eventually experienced by his fellow tonal compatriots. Today, he is best known for a single song (“Walt Whitman in 1989”) published in The AIDS Quilt Songbook.

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