



Western
Music

Don Wright Faculty of Music

**FRIDAYS AT 12:30 SERIES
CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN MUSIC**

Friday, January 10, 2025

12:30 p.m., von Kuster Hall and [via livestream](#)

Susan Gouthro, soprano

Marie-Elise Boyer, piano

Kalypso (2015)
~Poetry by Duncan McFarlane

Cecilia Livingston
(b. 1984)

Breath Alone (2024)
Eva Hesse (1936-1970)
Nelly Sachs (1891-1970)
~Poetry by Anne Michaels

short pause

from Porch Songs (2019-2022)
The Reluctant Armchair
~Poetry by Janet Windeler Ryan

Martha Hill Duncan
(b. 1955)

Silent Awakening (2009)
Lily and Monarch
The Bloom of Youth
Still
The Awakening
~Poetry by Iman Habibi and Houshang Vessal

Iman Habibi
(b. 1985)

Canadian soprano **Susan Gouthro** and French pianist **Marie-Elise Boyer** began their collaboration in 2010 at the opera house in Kiel, Germany where they were engaged on full-time contracts as soloist and vocal coach. They worked together on numerous productions such as Puccini's *La Bohème*, Massenet's *Manon* and Dvořák's *Rusalka*. They were able to continue their long-lasting friendship and common passion for Art Song when they both relocated separately to the United States to pursue Doctoral studies. Most recently, they presented a recital of contemporary Canadian composers at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi in March 2024. They look forward to upcoming recitals featuring compositions by women in the Boston area this Spring.

PROGRAM NOTES

Cecilia Livingston

Toronto-based Canadian composer Cecilia Livingston specializes in vocal music, and since 2022, holds the position of composer-in-residence at the Canadian Opera Company. She was composer-in-residence at Glyndebourne Opera in England from 2019-2022. Her music is lyrical, yet often mixes various styles as we hear in her piece *Kalypso*, which incorporates jazz elements. **Kalypso** is a female figure from Greek mythology who has trapped Odysseus on her island after his shipwreck. After seven years Odysseus leaves the island to return to his wife Penelope. Kalypso yearns for the return of her lover and for the rain, which has helped to keep him with her.

Breath Alone is a cycle featuring three songs that step inside the lives of three women who followed their creative and intellectual passions. We are presenting the pieces depicting the first two women, Eva Hesse and Nelly Sachs. In the words of Anne Michaels, the poet of these songs, they depict a “fascinating, complicated relationship between intense personal lives and larger historical events.”

Eva Hesse (1939-1970) was born in Germany just before WW2 broke out and the Nazis took over Germany. At that time, they had what they called Kindertransport trains to evacuate Jewish children out of Germany to various other European countries. Eva, at 2 years old and her older sister, were placed on one of the last trains and sent to the Netherlands. The poet Anne Michaels includes fragments from Eva's father's diary where he mentions bringing them to the train station not knowing whether he would ever see them again.

The piece chronicles important events in Eva's life. She was a pioneering and famous sculptor. Famous for using unusual material in her art like plastics, latex, silicon and fiberglass. She moved to New York with her husband, also a sculptor. He eventually leaves her and her feelings of the disintegration of their relationship and being left by him permeate the piece as well. Eva died young at 34 of a brain tumor. She had several unsuccessful operations. This song takes all these aspects of Eva's life and mixes them together, sometimes bouncing back and forth from present to past.

Nelly Sachs (1891-1970), a famous poet and playwright, was also born in Germany and was Jewish. She lived through the Nazi era and was so traumatized by the events she witnessed that she lost the power of speech for some time. She was able to escape to Sweden with her mother in 1940, on the last flight from Nazi Germany to Sweden a week before she was scheduled to report to a concentration camp. Nelly cared for her mother in Sweden until her death. After her mother's death, Nelly suffered several mental breakdowns, characterized by hallucinations, paranoia and delusions of being persecuted by Nazis and spent several years in a mental institution. While hospitalized she continued to write. While in Sweden, Nelly became a poignant spokeswoman for the grief and yearning of her fellow Jews. Between 1950 and the early 60's she wrote many important works including collections of poetry and plays. In 1966 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Martha Hill Duncan

Originally from Houston, Martha moved to Kingston, ON Canada in 1982. In appreciation of her adopted country, many of her vocal and choral works are set to Canadian texts and use Canadian themes. When her daughter, who is a singer, was growing up, Martha noticed that there was very little contemporary song repertoire for the younger voice and so she began writing them herself. She has an extensive vocal and choral catalogue and a wonderful website which includes a level designation according to the Royal Conservatory of Music Syllabus.

Her **Porch Songs** include songs titled *Sitting on the Porch*, *Southern Fried* and *The Reluctant Armchair*. In *The Reluctant armchair*, we are channeling the familiar feeling of not wanting summer to end. Especially when you know (as a Canadian) that it means 6 month of winter is knocking on your door!

Iman Habibi

Iman Habibi is an Iranian Canadian composer and pianist. He has won numerous prizes and composed pieces commissioned by major Canadian and American orchestras including the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

Silent Awakening is a song cycle that marks several firsts for Iman Habibi: the first commission he completed, the first songs he wrote, and his first attempt to write music that merges his Persian heritage with his classical music world.

The first song, **Lily and Monarch**, was premiered separately in Canada, and was the first time that Iman Habibi's music was broadcast on the radio. When the entire cycle was premiered in the US at a Marilyn Horne Foundation concert in New York, something funny happened. The composer got rejected by the US border agent because of the Iranian birthplace in his passport. He could not attend the performance because of this, and Marilyn Horne must have thought he did not care about it. She stated in an interview that he "didn't show up for his premiere."

Silent Awakening comprises four songs in English and Persian, with poetry by Iman Habibi and Iranian poet Houshang Vessal. Lily and Monarch is a song of sacrifice. It tells the story of a monarch butterfly who lives just for the lily flower, only to realize that an emperor butterfly already won the lily's heart. The monarch dies without even being noticed by the beautiful flower. **The Bloom of Youth** is a song of growth. The writing in both the piano and vocal lines resemble the branches of a tree that are intertwined. **Still** is a song of unrest; the music is very atmospheric and contemplative. It invites the audience to reflect on the message contained within silence and calm. **The Awakening** is a song of hope. The music is extremely energetic and exciting, like a celebration of life. In this Persian poem, Houshang Vessal quotes a verse from medieval Persian poet Sa'adi:

"Arise, as the winter departs,
Open the doors to your homes and orchards.
May you never be upset by the unkind life,
And never suffer separation."

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THE ARTISTS

Dr. Susan Gouthro is an Assistant Professor of Voice at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. For over a decade she was engaged as a soprano soloist on a full-time contract at the opera house in Kiel, Germany. Here she performed many of the most important roles in the lyric soprano repertoire including Mozart roles Pamina, Queen of the Night, Donna Anna, and Fiordiligi; French roles Micaela, Marguerite, Antonia, and Manon; and Italian roles Liù, Mimì, Musetta, and Violetta. Her diversity extends to German operetta (Hanna Glawari in *The Merry Widow* and Rosalinde in *Die Fledermaus*) and the first forays into Wagner's operas with Eva in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Czech roles which round out this singer's repertoire are the title roles in *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *Rusalka*, as well as Marie in *The Bartered Bride*.

During this time, Susan Gouthro had many opportunities to perform as a guest at other German houses including the opera companies in Cologne, Würzburg, Bremen, Lübeck, Dessau, Hagen, and Kassel. An avid concert and recital performer, she performed in many oratorios and was a featured artist in diverse Lieder Abende and chamber music concerts. In the 2015/2016 season, Susan Gouthro was celebrated as the opera-diva Carlotta in the musical *The Phantom of the Opera* in Germany, singing eight shows a week for a total of over 300 performances in a production that was cast and rehearsed by the creative team from Phantom on Broadway.

Having studied and performed contemporary music at The Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada, The Britten-Pears School in England, and on the opera stage in Germany with two world premieres, Susan Gouthro has been delving lately into new music from her home country, Canada. Alongside teaching, researching and performing music by living composers has become one of her passions.

Marie-Elise Boyer is a French pianist specializing in vocal repertoire, female composers and new works.

She formed with her sister Sophie Boyer the duo Les Boyer Sisters. Together, they recorded newly composed songs on poems by Lucien Guérinel for a recording that was released in 2020. They also designed a program around women composers for a salon recital that is featured on medici.tv.

Marie-Elise is currently pursuing a DMA in Collaborative Piano at the New England Conservatory in Boston, under the musical guidance of Cameron Stowe and Jonathan Feldman, as well as artists such as Tanya Blaich, Kayo Iwama and Margo Garrett. She is the recipient of a scholarship by the Ken and Barbara Burnes Scholarship Fund. She previously completed her studies in Accompaniment and Vocal Coaching at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, where she was awarded two Masters with Distinction. There, she participated in the Creative Voices class led by mezzo-soprano Sarah Walker, where she worked closely with singers and composers. She then furthered her training as a vocal coach at the National Opera Studio in London.

Marie-Elise has worked as a vocal coach in German theaters for 9 years, including the Staatsoper Hamburg, the Staatstheater Nürnberg and the Theater Bremen. Additionally, she worked with Cape Town Opera's Young Artist Program in 2018 to coach young singers there; she subsequently went on a tour in the UK with them.

Her passion for Art Song led her to reach the Final of both Nadia et Lili Boulanger competition in Paris with Eva Ganizate in 2009 and Concours International de Mélodie Française in Toulouse with Sophie Boyer in 2013. She won the First Prize in the Elsa Respighi competition in Verona, Italy, in October 2018, with Canadian Soprano Leah Gordon.