

| 6 |
Oratorio
chorale

Program Notes - *Mass for the Endangered*
Written by Emily Isaacson

Sarah Kirkland Snider may feel familiar to Classical Uprising audiences. Like me, Snider is a (blonde) woman in a male-dominated field (me, conducting; her, composing), the founder of an arts nonprofit, and a mom of two. Also like me, Snider believes that we need to break down the norms surrounding classical music, and she enjoys Beyoncé as much as Bach (well, almost as much).

But in most other ways, Snider is in a league of her own. Snider has recently been deemed “a rising star on the American compositional scene” (*Wall Street Journal*), “one of the decade’s more gifted, up-and-coming modern classical composers” (*Pitchfork*), and “an important representative of 21st-century trends in composition” (*New York Classical Review*). This success did not come until she was 37, but once it did, she quickly gained national attention.

At an early age, Snider felt drawn to music despite coming from a non-musical family. She grew up singing in church choirs, and for several summers attended the American Boychoir School in her hometown of Princeton, New Jersey: “I fell in love with choral singing there...these experiences were profoundly formative for me.”¹ While enriching, these opportunities offered a conservative musical diet: “As a kid, my heroes were Mozart, Bach, Debussy, Chopin...I didn’t have a lot of exposure to new music, and I certainly didn’t know of any female composers (living or dead), so composition just wasn’t on my radar as a professional possibility.”² Nevertheless, Snider began “writing stuff down” when she was 7 or 8.³ It was not until high school, however, when she showed these ideas to her piano teacher, that she viewed her tunes as composing. Snider continued writing music while studying psychology and sociology at Wesleyan University. She would later describe these early works as “somewhere between early Debussy and Joni Mitchell.”⁴ After graduating in 1995, she moved to New York, worked at a pro-choice law firm, and began listening to PJ Harvey, Sleater-Kinney, and Liz Phair.⁵ While considering a career in law, she began writing music for experimental theater and ultimately pursued composition full-time. At 25, she took her first composition lesson and started exploring new

¹ <https://sarahkirklandsnider.bandcamp.com/album/mass-for-the-endangered>

² <https://15questions.net/interview/fifteen-questions-interview-sarah-kirkland-snider/page-1/>

³ <https://15questions.net/interview/fifteen-questions-interview-sarah-kirkland-snider/page-1/>

⁴ Weininger, David (2015-11-26). "In Snider's 'Penelope,' evidence of a composer's odyssey." *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved 2021-07-02.

⁵ McGovern, Chris (2012-06-06). "Sarah Kirkland Snider." Chris McGovern Music. Retrieved 2021-07-02; <https://15questions.net/interview/fifteen-questions-interview-sarah-kirkland-snider/page-1/>

music: “Arvo Pärt, Meredith Monk, John Adams, Louis Andriessen, and Julia Wolfe were big for me.”⁶ From 2001 to 2007, Snider co-curated the Look & Listen Festival, a new music series set in modern art galleries (remind anyone else of Portland Bach Experience salons?). She enrolled in the composition master's program first at New York University, then transferred to the Yale School of Music to receive a Master of Music degree in 2005 and an Artistic Diploma in Composition in 2006.⁷

In 2008, along with composers Judd Greenstein (who went to college with me) and William Britelle, Snider started New Amsterdam Records. Often abbreviated as NewAm, the organization promotes classically trained musicians who fall between traditional genre boundaries. According to *Time Out New York*, “Few organizations have done more to shape 21st-century music in New York City.”

Snider’s breakthrough success as a composer came in 2010 with the album release of *Penelope*, an indie-rock folk song cycle for female voice and chamber orchestra. Based on Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, *Penelope* imagines the experience from the perspective of Odysseus's wife. The album received widespread critical acclaim and commercial success: *Time Out New York* named *Penelope* its “No. 1 Classical Album of 2010” and NPR deemed the song cycle among its “Top Five Albums of 2010.”⁸

Despite this success, it was not until 2018 that Snider wrote a large-scale choral work. One of six works commissioned by Trinity Church Wall Street as part of their “Mass Re-Imagining” project, *Mass for the Endangered* uses a religious framework that focuses not on our relationship to God but instead on our relationship to the natural world. Snider explains,

The origin of the Mass is rooted in humanity’s concern for itself, expressed through worship of the divine—which, in the Catholic tradition, is a God in the image of man...I thought it would be interesting to take the Mass’s musical modes of spiritual contemplation and apply them to concern for non-human life—animals, plants, and the environment. There is an appeal to a higher power—for mercy, forgiveness, and intervention—but that appeal is directed not to God but rather to Nature itself.

This interplay between tradition and invention, between ancient rituals and modern sensibilities, is present not just in the subject matter but in *Mass*’s musical language and libretto: “I was thrilled to immerse myself in memories of singing the Mozart, Brahms, and Fauré Requiems, the Palestrina and Byrd Masses, the Bach chorales.”⁹ Like Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*, the libretto interpolates the traditional Catholic Mass liturgy with poetry by Nathaniel Bellows (b. 1972), Snider’s frequent collaborator. *Mass* neither pays homage to these masterworks, however, nor attempts to upend those traditions:

⁶ <https://15questions.net/interview/fifteen-questions-interview-sarah-kirkland-snider/page-1/>

⁷ Alumna Sarah Kirkland Snider wins DSO Female Composers' Award." *Yale School of Music*. 2014-03-31. Retrieved 2021-07-02.

⁸ "The Best and Worst of 2010". *Time Out New York*. Archived from the original on 24 December 2010; Schaeffer, John (8 December 2010). "[The 5 Best Genre-Defying Albums of 2010](#)". *NPR*. Archived from [the original](#) on 23 July 2019. Retrieved 8 August 2011.

⁹ <https://sarahkirklandsnider.bandcamp.com/album/mass-for-the-endangered>

*I wanted to open the gates in my mind between centuries-old European vocal traditions and those of more recent American vernacular persuasion, and write from a place where differing thoughts about line, text, form, and expression could co-exist.*¹⁰

Each of the six movements begins with a motive, either in the instruments or the voices, that is developed and expanded throughout the movement. The resulting genreless work is “a celebration of, and an elegy for, the natural world—animals, plants, insects, the planet itself—an appeal for greater awareness, urgency, and action.”¹¹

After hearing the premiere by Trinity Wall Street, Snider revised *Mass*, so much so that she “spent almost as much time revising the piece after the premiere as I spent writing it beforehand.”¹² The rewrite was recorded by the English vocal ensemble Gallicantus on Snider’s own record label, NewAm. For the album art, Bellows created an illustrated triptych of endangered flora and fauna that evokes medieval Christian altarpieces and stained-glass windows. This imagery became the inspiration for Deborah Johnson/CandyStations videos, which Snider helped design to accompany the music.

Mass received lofty acclaim similar to Snider’s previous albums. It was named one of *The Boston Globe*’s “10 Reasons to Keep Falling for Classical Music,” appeared on numerous year-end lists, including NPR and *The Nation*, and cemented Snider’s prominence among contemporary composers. It is not these accolades, however, that made me fall in love with *Mass for the Endangered*. To me as a music nerd, *Mass* sounded as if William Byrd walked into a bar in Brooklyn, or Sufjan Stevens traveled back in time. The genreless, multi-dimensional sounds were beautiful and thrilling. As an environmentalist, I wanted to share this “hymn for the voiceless and the discounted, a requiem for the not-yet-gone” in hopes that it might inspire action and change. And as an artist, I sensed a kindred spirit when, in an interview, Snider commented that “Trusting oneself... is the greatest challenge.”¹³ I have been following Snider’s work for fifteen years, and it is a joy and honor to introduce her to the Maine community.

— Emily Isaacson

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