and the
NORTH CAROLINA
NEWMUSIC INITIATIVE

and

ECU OPERA THEATER

present

MELINDA WAGNER’S
FOUR SETTINGS

and

TELL IT SLANT

March 22-23, 2019, 7:30pm
A.J. Fletcher Recital Hall, Greenville, NC
This evening’s music

**Four Settings (2004)** Melinda Wagner

I. Last Poem (Robert Desnos)
II. The Wings (Denise Levertov)
III. Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers (Emily Dickinson)
IV. Wild Nights – Wild Nights! (Emily Dickinson)

Natalie Smith, flute; Molly Lowder, clarinet;
Delaney Meyers, violin; Ryan Tolentino, viola;
Samantha Flores, cello; J. Christopher Buddo, bass;
Eric Stellrecht, piano
Catherine Gardner, soprano
William Staub, conductor

**Tell It Slant (2018, WORLD PREMIERE)** Wagner

NC NewMusic Initiative Commission

I. Counterfeit, Chorale (with Faux Nursery Rhyme)-choir, soloists
II. Mantra (recitative) - baritone solo
III. Pseudomenos (aria) - baritone solo
IV. To Say - soprano soloists, choir
V. Galliard (with Faux Nursery Rhyme) - men’s choir
VI. Three Things - alto & tenor soloists, choir
VII. Tell It Slant - soprano, alto & tenor soloists, choir
VIII. Chorale (with Faux Nursery Rhyme)- SATB soloists

**QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION WITH COMPOSER MELINDA WAGNER**

**Tell It Slant** Wagner

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Please join Melinda Wagner, William Staub, Catherine Gardner, and all this evening’s performers at a reception in the lobby following this evening’s music.

**NORTH CAROLINA NEWMUSIC INITIATIVE INITIATING NEW IDEAS ABOUT NEW MUSIC**

The **NORTH CAROLINA NEWMUSIC INITIATIVE** is made possible only with the generous sponsorship of foundations, corporations and individuals. We are profoundly grateful for the support they offer, and proudly count those below among the Initiative’s benefactors (current as of 12/13/18):

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With special thanks to Chris Buddo, Chris Uffers, Tom Huener, Harley Darrt, Thomas Sisson, Alex Davis, Paula Toothman, Dawn Phillips, Denise Warren, Michael Crane, Dominic Mrakovich; the School of Music staff, faculty and students for their ongoing support.
To Pattie, thanks for everything you do year-round.
The NEWMUSIC INITIATIVE’s NEW IDEA
ECU.EDU/NEWMUSIC

Our innovative Commissioning Program demonstrates a new paradigm for musicians’ training in the 21st century.

The NC NEWMUSIC INITIATIVE’s commissioning program involves students in all phases of the creation of new works—NEGOTIATING commission guidelines; COLLABORATING with composers as they develop new ideas; PERFORMING world premieres, and; RECORDING—to establish a norm of “initiating new music” in our community.

Through overlapping three-year cycles—a new cycle starting each year—for each commissioned composer, our students have selected and negotiated active commissions with:

Melinda Wagner—whose visits during 2017-18 have led to the performances we hear and record this weekend;

Lei Liang—selected last year, Lei has visited us this year, and will deliver sketches for our reading and feedback in mid-April. We will premiere and record his music for small ensembles in the spring, 2020;

Asha Srinivasan—students are now finalizing negotiations with this Lawrence University composer, who will visit us twice during 2019-2020 as we collaborate with her on the development of a new work. We’ll premiere that brand new piece in the spring of 2021.

All elements of this process—determining commissionees, meeting with commissioned composers, performing world premieres, and recording commissioned works—are an integral part of every year’s activities. Each stage of the commissioner-performer-composer relationship is revealed anew each year, ready for engagement with those at all stages of professional and musical development.

This unique program establishes a new model which nurtures connections among all involved in music’s life and continued growth—audiences, composers, and performer alike.

This ambitious initiative also creates additional opportunities for you to become involved. If you would like to explore other ways to further this mission—perhaps with a personalized commission or event—we would welcome the opportunity to customize a project to your interests.

We look forward to the most important form of support, your engagement with new ideas about new music, and to hearing your thoughts about what you encounter at the NEWMUSIC INITIATIVE’s many events this season.

Ed Jacobs
NewMusic Initiative Founding Director

Tell It Slant

FEATURED SOLOISTS
Ryan Stupinski, bass-baritone*
Ashton Worley, mezzo-soprano*
Kerby Baier, soprano*
Elijah Cole, tenor*
Arianna Ford, soprano*

VOCAL ENSEMBLE
Ivy Benson
Bailey Sutton
Margaret Fox
Devon Boyd*
Ashley Reynolds*
Kate Kasmier
Laura Hutchins
Elizabeth Waser
Lauren Walsh
Mikaela Schifter
Rebecca Davis
Emily Evans
Meredith Howell*

Payton Parker
Alexandra Fee
Jacquelyne Lorson*
Constance Prince
Jordan Cartrette*
Emma Daves*
Jacob McCain*
Jordan Snow*
James Mauk
John Hale
Stanley McCauley
Evan Martschenko*
Daniel Eckes
Tucker Wright

*Chamber Vocal Ensemble

INSTRUMENTAL ENSEMBLE
Natalie Smith, flute
Molly Lowder, clarinet
Cameron Stephenson, bassoon
Michael Norman, percussion
Delaney Meyers, violin
Ryan Tolentino, viola
Samantha Flores, cello
Eric Stellrecht, piano

William Staub, conductor
John Kramar, director
Eric Stellrecht, music director/rehearsal pianist
Daniel Shirley, Director of ECU Opera Theater
James Mauk, musical assistant
Emily Evans, stage management assistant
MELINDA WAGNER

Celebrated as an “...eloquent, poetic voice in contemporary music...” [American Record Guide], Melinda Wagner’s esteemed catalog of works embodies music of exceptional beauty, power, and intelligence. Wagner received widespread attention when her colorful Concerto for Flute, Strings and Percussion earned her the Pulitzer Prize in 1999. Since then, major works have included Concerto for Trombone, for Joseph Alessi and the New York Philharmonic, a piano concerto, Extremity of Sky, commissioned by the Chicago Symphony for Emanuel Ax, and Little Moonhead, composed for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, as part of its popular “New Brandenburgs” project.

Noted for its “…prismatic colors and…lithe sense of mystery…” [Washington Post], Extremity of Sky has been performed by Emanuel Ax with the National Symphony (on tour), the Toronto and Kansas City Symphonies, and the Staatskapelle Berlin.

Championed early on by Daniel Barenboim, Wagner has received three commissions from the Chicago Symphony; the most recent of these, Proceed, Moon, was premiered by the CSO under the baton of Susanna Mälkki in 2017. Other recent performances have come from the American Composers Orchestra, the United States Marine Band, BMOP, the American Brass Quintet, the Empyrean Ensemble, and the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society.

Among honors Wagner has received is a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and ASCAP. Wagner was given an honorary doctorate from Hamilton College, and a Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Pennsylvania in 2003. Melinda Wagner was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2017.

A passionate and inspiring teacher, Melinda Wagner has given master classes at many fine institutions across the United States, including Harvard, Yale, Eastman, Juilliard, and UC Davis. She has held faculty positions at Brandeis University and Smith College, and has served as a mentor at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, the Wellesley Composers Conference, and Yellow Barn. Ms. Wagner currently serves on the faculty of the Juilliard School of Music.

In the composer’s own words: Music offers composers an immeasurably rich and generous sonic landscape in which to explore the “life story” of each musical idea – its dramas, intrigues, joys and sorrows – a life. I strive to find various and persuasive ways of moving through the resulting temporal narrative, and to traverse a wide spectrum of expression and color on the way. Ultimately, I want listeners to know me; I want them to hear that while I enjoy the cerebral exercise, I am led principally by my ear, and by my heart.

V. Galliard (With Faux Nursery Rhyme)

Language is but a weapon used

To make certain the masses are confused;

Keep it simple and they’ll be deceived,

Tell the lie over and over and
It will be believed.

-Melinda Wagner

“Constant repetition of the lie makes the truth meaningless.”

“Alternative facts...are falsehoods.”

“Telling like it isn’t has become a form of the truth.”

“Truth isn’t truth.”

-phrases excerpted from various issues of the NY Times

VI. Three Things

Three things:
There is beauty in our world.
There is hope.

There is love.

Still,
There are millions of things — fearful and wondrous!
More than the ocean is deep, and the sky...

-anonymous

“Three things cannot long be hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.” –Buddha

VII. Tell it Slant

Tell All the Truth

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

-Emily Dickinson

VIII. Chorale (With Faux Nursery Rhyme)

Things get broken
set afame,
Souls need mending,
hatred is to blame.

Be of honor,
kindness too...
Fractures also
let light through.

-Melinda Wagner
TELL IT SLANT

I. Counterfeit
A Counterfeit — A Plated Person
A Counterfeit—a Plated Person—
I would not be—
Whatever strata of Iniquity
My Nature underlie—
Truth is good Health—and Safety, and the Sky.
How meagre, what an Exile—is a lie,
And vocal — when we die—
-Emily Dickinson

Chorale (With Faux Nursery Rhyme)
Break the pitcher,
Burn the pot;
Tell a lie
And you won’t get caught.
Make a pudding,
Bake a pie;
I will never tell a lie.
-Melinda Wagner

II. Mantra
“The world has become a difficult place.”
“...we have already become a post-truth society...”
“...telling like is isn’t has become a form of the truth...”
“Sometimes the right mantra is everything you need to put everything
into perspective.” “Some people need pints of cookie-dough ice cream
and to put their phones in the freezer.” “What is truth?”
“...is it humble, is it silent?...”
“Truth is relative.”
-Pontius Pilate; phrases excerpted from issues of the NY Times

III. Pseudomenos (The Liar’s Paradox)
A man says: “What I am saying now is a lie.” If the statement is true,
then he is lying, even though the statement is true. If the statement is a
lie, then he is not actually lying, even though the statement is a lie.
Thus, if the speaker is lying, he tells the truth, and vice versa.
-Eubulides of Miletus

IV. To Say
To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not
that it is, is false. While to say of what is
that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.
-Aristotle (definition of truth)

FOUR SETTINGS

“Poetry-driven music” is how Wagner characterizes her Four Settings, commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center by The Wharton Center for the Performing Arts. The poems are diverse in style and subject and not joined together by any narrative thread, but they are all related in their embodiment of dichotomy. [see texts page 7]

Shade and darkness are held against light in the verses by Robert Desnos and Denise Levertov; the eternal verities of time and space are held against the passing of earthly things in Emily Dickinson’s “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers”; and tempest is held against safe harbor in Dickinson’s “Wild Nights.”

Wagner says that she largely avoided obvious “text-painting” in favor of creating an expressive tension, sometimes even an irony, between words and music, and gave the poems a “high profile” to suggest their rich resonances of emotion and experience, a process she compares to turning a gemstone in a shaft of light to behold its varied, multihued facets.

“Last Poem,” the first of the Settings, is literally that — the final verse that the French poet Robert Desnos (1900-1945) wrote before his death in the concentration camp at Terezín — and Wagner has given it a sparse setting that suggests its longing, its sadness, and, at the end, its desperation.

Denise Levertov (1923 - 1997) was born in England and became one of America’s most respected poets and teachers of creative writing (at Brandeis, MIT, Tufts, and Stanford) after immigrating to this country in 1948. The setting of Levertov’s “The Wings” is a breathless soliloquy that parallels the poem’s quick rhythms and suggests the flight implicit in its title.

Wagner found “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers” by Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886) to be a “cold” poem, evoking for her the chilling silence that Ovid in his Metamorphoses attributes to Morpheus, the shaper of the dreams of mortals as he sleeps in his cave, or the airless silence of limitless space, or the eternal silence of the closed coffin. There is nothing “safe” about Dickinson’s passionate “Wild Nights,” according to Wagner’s reading of the poem, and her setting closes not with an affirmation but with a dying whisper.

CATHERINE GARDNER

Soprano Catherine Gardner joined the School of Music at East Carolina University in 2018 as Assistant Professor in the Vocal Studies Department. She currently teaches studio voice, graduate diction and graduate art song literature classes. Though she is new to ECU, Catherine taught for over ten years at the Beckett School at Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

Dr. Gardner has been praised for her embodied singing and dramatic range in both art song and opera. Recent highlights include Schubert’s Totus in corde languo with Detroit Symphony clarinetist Laurence Liberson (Michigan), performing
as guest soloist for Stratford Symphony Orchestra’s “New Year in Vienna,” Julianna Hall’s “A World Turned Upside Down” with pianist Catherine Garner and a solo recital of night songs with pianist Eric Stellrecht. She is especially fond of singing the works of living composers and has premiered several roles including “Ophelia” (Amy Kirsten’s Ophelia Forever, Peabody Conservatory), “Madame X” (Bill Miller’s The Rival, Orpheus Productions), and Craig Bohmler’s cycle, Songs of Stone (Canadian Premiere, Stratford Symphony Orchestra).

Dr. Gardner studied voice at the Peabody Conservatory (MM and Graduate Diploma) and received her doctorate at the University of Toronto (Canada) under soprano Wendy Nielsen.

TELL IT SLANT
A Note from the Director

We live in a time of division. This statement can apply to every era from the start of humanity on this earth to the present. Many will argue that our present division ranks among some of the most intense conflicts in centuries. Melinda Wagner, the composer of Tell It Slant, has given a profound gift with an abundance of food for thought. While always being true to her own voice, she has shown us subtleties and seriousness in veracity and mendacity.

This work is not an opera in the traditional sense of the word. Opera’s founding mothers and fathers envisioned the art form as a way to enlighten audiences while entertaining them. The word “opera” is plural of the word “opus.” We can honestly translate “opera” to “works.” Therefore, I proclaim Tell It Slant to be an opera. Its combination of texts by no less than six people with musical contributions for solo voice, vocal ensemble in multiple combinations, and instrumental chamber ensemble are profound.

Being a fan of opera without narrative (Four Saints in Three Acts and Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters come to mind), I considered ways to bring the work to life without the clutch of a plot. So, I chose to assign the singers to specific groups so that they might personally relate to the text and music. The eight groups are: Church Folks, Country Club Members, Welfare Recipients, Immigrant Children, University Professors, Hollywood Elite, Coal Miners, and Members of the Media. Ryan Stupienski’s character is unique here, as it does not fall into any of my designated groups. Clearly he is a leader of some sort. While it would have been easy to turn him into a cardboard replica of a noted politician, this character warranted something deeper. He may not morph into a tree-hugging liberal by the work’s close, but he clearly begins to question reality – both the crowd’s interpretation of truth, and his own. It has been an honor to be involved in the process of bringing this work to life. I hope it has a wonderfully long life.

—John Kramar

“Truth must dazzle gradually or ev’ry man be blind” – Emily Dickinson

“Fractures also let light through” – Melinda Wagner

FOUR SETTINGS
Texts

I. Last Poem

I have so fiercely dreamed of you
And walked so far and spoken of you so,
Loved a shade of you so hard
That now I’ve no more left of you. I’m left to be a shade among shades
A hundred times more shade than shade To be shade cast time and time again into your sun-transfigured life.

Robert Desnos
Translated from the French
by X. J. Kennedy.

II. The Wings

Something hangs in back of me,
I can’t see it, can’t move it.
I know it’s black,
a hump on my back.
It’s heavy. You can’t see it.
What’s in it? Don’t tell me you don’t know. It’s what you told me about—
black
inimical power, cold whispering out of it and around me and
swelling you flat.
But what if, like a camel, it’s pure energy I store,
and carry humped and heavy?
Not black, not
that terror, stupidity
of cold rage; or black only for being pent there?
What if released in air it became a white
source of light, a fountain
of light? Could all that weight be the power of flight?
Look inward: see me with embryo wings, one feathered in soot, the other
blazing ciliactions of ember, pale
flare-pinions. Well—
could I go on one wing,
the white one?

Emily Dickinson

IV. Wild Nights—Wild Nights!

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
Were I with thee Wild Nights should be Our luxury!
Futile – the winds – To a heart in port –
Done with the compass – Done with the chart!
Rowing in Eden – Ah, the seal! Might I moor – Tonight –
In thee!

Emily Dickinson

III. Safe in their Alabaster Chambers

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers -
Untouched by Morning -
and untouched by noon -
Sleep the meek members of the
Resurrection,
Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone -
Grand go the Years,
In the Crescent above them -
Worlds scoop their Arches -
and Firmaments - row -
Diadems - drop -
And Doges surrender -
Soundless as Dots,
On a Disk of Snow.

Emily Dickinson