



THE MIDDLEBURY PERFORMING ARTS SERIES
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present

Sky Was Possible

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2024
7:30 PM ET
ROBISON HALL, MAHANEY ARTS CENTER

Sky Was Possible

Kristen Watson, Soprano
Su Lian Tan, Flute
John McDonald, Piano

Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kömmt, BWV 151

Aria - Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kömmt (*Sweet comfort, my Jesus comes*)

J. S. Bach
(1685–1750)

Sol, Ut

John McDonald
(b. 1960)

Daydreams

Su Lian Tan
(b. 1964)

Flute on the Bottom

John McDonald

☞ President Laurie Patton and Professor Emeritus John Elder discuss *Sky Was Possible*'s poems. ☞

Sky Was Possible

- I. For the Red-Throated Sparrow
- II. Pine Forest
- III. Heirloom
- IV. Beams

Su Lian Tan
Poems by Laurie Patton
(b. 1961)

A stream of this evening's concert is also available at go.middlebury.edu/skywaspossible



Please join us for a reception in the lobby after the performance.

*This performance is made possible with generous support
from the Performing Arts Series and the Office of the President.*

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Photography and the use of audio or video equipment are prohibited.*

Program Notes

BACH Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kömmt, BWV 151

Program note, text, and translation courtesy of Hyperion Records

The Cantata BWV 151 has a kind of intimacy that makes it the most personal of Bach's Christmas cantatas. *Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kömmt* was written in 1725, with a text by Georg Christian Lehms. It opens as a G major aria in 12/8 marked *molto adagio* for soprano, obbligato flute, and strings [played on piano in our Middlebury performance]. It is hauntingly beautiful. Is this the Virgin Mother herself singing a lullaby to her newborn child, or is it simply solace offered to the fragile believer through Jesus' arrival on earth? Any literal association with the musing Madonna is quickly dispatched the moment the B section bursts out in an ecstatic *alla breve* dance of joy, part gavotte, part gigue—"Heart and soul rejoice." Flute, soprano, and accompaniment (momentarily) exult in elegant triplet fioriture—similar in style and mood to the kind of music Handel wrote as a young man when he first encountered the works of Scarlatti and Steffani in Italy—before the return of the opening cradle song.

Arie - Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kömmt

Süsser Trost, mein Jesus kömmt,
Jesus wird anitzt geboren!
Herz und Seele freuet sich,
Denn mein liebster Gott hat mich
Nun zum Himmel auserkoren.

Aria - Sweet comfort, my Jesus comes

Sweet comfort, my Jesus comes,
Jesus now is born!
Heart and soul rejoice,
for my dearest God has
now destined me for heaven.

MCDONALD *Sol, Ut*

Program note courtesy of the composer, John McDonald

Composed for composer and flutist Su Lian Tan as a small but heartfelt birthday greeting, this abstract sound-picture jumps off from and lands on "Sol, Ut," framing the proceedings with a spelling of Su. This two-note Su motive provides connective fiber for the action of the piece. Its contrapuntal phrases lengthen in a manner somewhere between reflective and playful—sometimes a bit precariously. Toward the end, two-note statements ask a few more short questions before a bit of cloudy mystery inconclusively closes the view of whatever picture may have been painted. Is the sound-picture neatly or disturbingly framed by the final two Su strong-notes?

TAN *Daydreams*

Program note courtesy of the composer, Su Lian Tan

Daydreams is from a set of solo piano works entitled *The Other Pictures*. Each of the movements is inspired by paintings from different artists. Daydreams reflects the vision of Marc Chagall, his lovers, and starlit skies.

MCDONALD *Flute On The Bottom*

Program note courtesy of the composer, John McDonald

You may know about yogurt with fruit on the bottom.

Here, the flute is almost always in the bass (often literally at the bottom of the registral span), yielding a good deal of high piano writing. The piece was made as a gift for Su Lian Tan, for a concert we presented together at both Bennington and Middlebury Colleges in November of 2008.

TAN *Sky Was Possible*

Poems by Laurie Patton

Program note courtesy of the poet, Laurie Patton

These four poems are from my earliest and most recent books of poems. It was a delight to have such a careful reading of these poems by Su Tan, who at first listened to them for their poetry, and then had the idea that they would lend themselves to music.

The first three [“For the Red-Throated Sparrow,” “Pine Forest,” and “Heirloom”] are from *Fire’s Goal: Poems from a Hindu Year*, a collection that reflects on the ritual cycle of Hindu holidays. I wrote them first in Sanskrit, and then I translated myself into English, as I wanted to try a short, non-metrical conversational style of Sanskrit to create poems that resonated in both the ancient and contemporary worlds. Capturing the essence of a particular emotional experience is part of the Indian idea of *rasa*, or “flavor,” and is often achieved through small and subtle suggestions. All of them use traditional Indian images of love lost and found but shaped through contemporary brevity and suggestion.

The final poem, “Beams,” is from *House Crossing*, a poetic homage to Gaston Bachelard’s idea that the elemental forms of architecture (floors, corners, ceilings, windows, among many others) mold our imaginations in profound ways. One could say that the poems in *House Crossing* convey the *rasas*, or essential experiences, of living in a home. “Beams” was originally written for my father when he was alive; he passed away last June, so one could say it is also a poem of love’s passing.

We conceived of this project when the world was in a different place. The fact that it endured through the pandemic and so many other forms of upheaval is a testimony to the power of artistic collaboration.

Program note courtesy of the composer, Su Lian Tan

I am often drawn to a wide color palette. These poems by Laurie Patton are deep in varied hues and also represent a unique view of Asian culture. Nostalgic for my Southeast Asian upbringing and heritage, I seized the opportunity to set these verses to music. References to nature abound, and I unite them with gamelan-, Chinese-, and shakuhachi-inspired musical themes and motifs, also of similar origins. The four songs outline a journey of love, love lost, and experience, as if on a walk connected by tree branches and wooden beams, finally returning home to America in reflection.

For the Red-Throated Sparrow

When the branches rustled,
I was dreaming of Draupadī
singing as she bathed her hair
in Duhśāsana's blood—
but you wake me with music;
and your red throat reminds me
as Draupadī did
that in some seasons
there is no difference
between beauty and wound.

Pine Forest

thin pine shoots up
at the curve in the creek
the light through its needles
sharp as spring
sharp as your question,
Will you wait with me?

Heirloom

my bracelet still hangs
on the bedpost
where you placed it
my earring still dangles
from the sheet where
it fell from your hand

my mother visits
and tells me
I must take better care
of my jewelry

Beams

In our kitchen
they were vaults
of darkened sky—
their splinters
stars
to be gathered
by our hands.

You lifted me up
so I could touch them.

Perhaps it was then
I began to believe
sky was possible
because of the circle
of your arms.

Laurie L. Patton

Laurie L. Patton is the 17th president of Middlebury and the first woman to lead the institution in its 223-year history. Patton joined Middlebury in 2015 after serving as dean of Duke University's Trinity College of Arts and Sciences and as the Robert F. Durden Professor of Religion.



Patton is an authority on South Asian history, culture, and religion, and religion in the public square. She is the author or editor of 10 books and more than 60 articles and has translated the classical Sanskrit text *The Bhagavad Gita*. She is also the author of three books of poems: *House Crossing*, Barrytown: Station Hill Press 2018; *Angel's Task: Poems in Biblical Time*, Barrytown: Station Hill Press 2011; and *Fire's Goal: Poems from a Hindu Year*, Seattle: White Clouds Press 2003.

From 1996 to 2011, Patton served on the faculty and administration at Emory University, where she was the Charles Howard Candler Professor of Religions and the inaugural director of Emory's Center for Faculty Development and Excellence in the Office of the Provost. Patton began her career at Bard College, where she was assistant professor of Asian religions from 1991 to 1996.

Patton earned her BA from Harvard University in 1983 and her PhD from the University of Chicago in 1991. She served as president of the American Society for the Study of Religion in 2011 and the American Academy of Religion, made up of over 9,000 members, in 2019. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2018 in two categories, philosophy/religion and educational leadership.

In her inaugural address, Patton described a vision of a Middlebury that would actively engage with the most challenging issues facing society and challenged the community "to have more and better arguments, with greater respect, stronger resilience, and deeper wisdom." Since then, the College has inaugurated Envisioning Middlebury, Middlebury's strategic framework. In 2019, Patton announced Energy2028, Middlebury's bold plan to address the threat of climate change, after having achieved carbon neutrality in 2016; Middlebury's core campus will be powered by renewable energy in four years. In 2020, Patton's team launched the new residential learning program, Compass. Under her leadership, in the pandemic year, Middlebury had one of the lowest rates of COVID in the nation, and in 2022, Middlebury received a \$25 million grant to begin the Kathryn Wasserman Davis Collaborative in Conflict Transformation. Dedicated to the study and development of conflict transformation skills as a liberal art, the collaborative supports wide-ranging initiatives in high school, undergraduate, graduate, global, and experiential learning.

In 2025, she will leave her role at Middlebury to become the president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She will remain a friend and fellow traveler as a resident of Shoreham, VT.

Su Lian Tan

Su Lian Tan is a much sought-after flutist and composer. Her music has been described as “the stunner of the evening” (*Washington Post*), and “refined, cultured compositions. Rewarding for everyone...a must own” (*Fanfare*). “*Lotus Lives* démontre que Montréal prend sa place dans la modernité de l’art lyrique. (*Lotus Lives* demonstrates that Montreal takes its place in the modernity of opera).”—Frederic Cardin, *CBC Radio Canada*. “Wonderfully dramatic music...a spike of energy recalls the trio in Beethoven’s second Razumovsky” (*Gramophone*).



Making her first recordings at the age of 14, she has been featured in *Flute Talk*, *Gramophone*, *Fanfare*, and *American Record Guide*. Tan has been commissioned by groups such as the Grammy-winning Takács String Quartet, Da Capo Chamber Players, and the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. Recordings of her music include a recent release, *PanSync*, featuring Carol Wincenc performing *Autumn Lute-Song* and Tan as a flutist. Other recent releases include *The Other Pictures*, commissioned and performed by pianist May Phang, and the album *Revelations* (ARSIS,) named for a piano quintet commissioned for cellist Sophie Shao. Her intermedia chamber opera *Lotus Lives* was performed to great acclaim. *Ming*, composed for Joe Burgstaller (trumpet) had its premiere performance in Singapore. Recent commissions include *Legends of Kintamani*, a cello concerto for Darrett Adkins and Oberlin Conservatory. Her *Concerto for Piccolo and Orchestra* for Nicola Mazzanti, which premiered at the Galway Flute Festival and the International Piccolo festival in Italy, is described by *Fanfare* magazine as “a true gem in this repertoire.” Her music is published by ECS Publishing and Theodore Presser.

A dedicated teacher, Tan is Fletcher Professor of the Arts at Middlebury, where she continues to be a mentor to talented young musicians. She was also the Slee Distinguished Chair of Composition at the University of Buffalo during 2023–2024. She has given seminars and masterclasses at Oberlin College, Boston University, and the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in Singapore, to name a few. She has received numerous accolades and citations for teaching as well as for her music, including awards from ASCAP, The Academy of Arts and Letters of Quebec, and the Toulmin and Naumburg Foundations. She was awarded several residencies from the Yaddo and MacDowell colonies. She holds degrees from the Trinity College, London (F.T.C.L.), Bennington College (B.A.), The Juilliard School (M.M.), and Princeton University (Ph.D.).

John McDonald

Described as “the New England master of the short piece,” John McDonald is a composer who tries to play the piano and a pianist who tries to compose. He is currently Professor of Music at Tufts University, where he teaches composition, theory, and performance. He was the Music Teachers National Association Composer of the Year in 2007 and served as the Valentine Visiting Professor of Music at



Amherst College in 2016–2017. His new recordings include *At All Device* (Bridge Records 9528; a collection of piano works played by soloist David Holzman; 2020); *Pan.Sync* (Arsis Audio; works by Su Lian Tan and John McDonald, performed by Tan [flutist], and McDonald, [pianist], with flutist Carol Wincenc and piccoloist Cynthia Meyers; 2022); *States of Play* (Bridge Records 9564; a collaborative retrospective of music by Robert Carl and John McDonald; 2022); and new short works as parts of recordings by pianists Andrew Rangell (Steinway and Sons *Waltz Inventions*; 2024) and Jihye Chang (New Focus Recordings *Boston Etudes*; 2024).

McDonald's research interests include composition and new music pedagogy; intermedia collaboration involving composing and performing solo and chamber music; writing for young and non-professional performers; music applications for visual art and science; and advocacy of new and overlooked composers through research and performance. His book, *Stirring Up the Music: The Life, Works, and Influence of Composer T(homas) J(efferson) Anderson*, is forthcoming from Borik Press. McDonald's works are published by American Composers Alliance (ACA), and he is currently serving a term on the Board of Governors for ACA.

Kristen Watson

Soprano Kristen Watson, hailed by critics for her “blithe and silvery” tone (*Boston Globe*) and “striking poise” (*Opera News*), has made solo appearances with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, American Classical Orchestra, Mark Morris Dance Group, Handel & Haydn Society, and Boston Baroque at such venues as Walt Disney Concert Hall, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and Boston's Symphony Hall. Opera audiences have heard her with such companies as Odyssey Opera and Boston Lyric Opera, in roles such as Tytania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Anne Trulove in *The Rake's Progress*, and The Voice of the Fountain in *Ainadamar*, directed by Peter Sellars. As a versatile crossover artist, she has given several solo performances with the Boston Pops under Keith Lockhart, and she also performs regularly with Emmanuel Music's Bach Cantata series, including their recent appearance at the 2024 Bachfest in Leipzig, Germany. She has received particular acclaim for her interpretations of Baroque repertoire, appearing as soloist for such groups as the San Francisco Early Music Society, Trinity Wall Street, North Carolina Symphony, Sarasa, Ars Antiqua, Aston Magna Festival, and the Carmel Bach Festival. An advocate of contemporary music, Watson has recently premiered works by composers such as Julian Grant, Eric Sawyer, Francine Trester, and Alex Berko. Solo recordings include Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and a collection of baroque cantatas with Musicians of the Old Post Road. Originally from Kansas, Watson teaches at Brandeis University and holds degrees from Carnegie Mellon University and Boston University.



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