

Reviews BEAM COLLABORATIONS AND INSPIRATIONS with Steven Serpa, Holt McCarley, Daniel Thomas Davis, and Tony Solitro:

Steven Serpa



Composer Steven Serpa. Photo by Jeremy Teal

The event also featured Hillsborough, North Carolina poet Jeffery Beam reading his beautiful 2003 poem “An Invocation,” which spreads his love and acute observation of nature over your mind like an embroidered cloak. If you have heard Beam read, you know how entrancing he can be voicing his own incantatory words. He was in Spartanburg to read his poem prior to a quartet playing music inspired by it and named for it, by composer Steven Serpa. The two had spoken and corresponded, but never met until the concert evening. Fortunately, they hit it off. And Serpa’s music is fully worthy of Beam’s words: “thorn & bright needle/light darting through us ... golden coagulate bomb/no petulant view...” Before the concert, I asked Serpa who he’d name as giants among contemporary composers, and he replied, “Barber.” Samuel Barber’s not with us any longer, but his influence can be clearly heard in Serpa’s lush lyricism. His [“An Invocation”](#) had been written for oboe and strings, but was played on the 30th by soprano saxophone and strings—something even Serpa had not heard before. It was splendid that way, and quite different in emotional tone from the oboe version on Serpa’s self-produced CD (which is gorgeous all the way through, and worth seeking out).

—*If a Treefalls in Spartanburg, it makes a sound at Hub-Bub*, [The Five Point Star: Kate Dobbs Ariail on the arts](#), Treefalls presents, Treefalls, Spartanburg, United States Recorded live at the Hub-Bub Showroom in downtown Spartanburg, SC. Friday, May 30, 2014

Steven Serpa’s Symphonic *An Invocation*: Serpa’s work began with a stunner of an oboe line, a surprisingly hummable tune that piques your interest. This work has some gorgeous interchanges between strings and the oboe — but it’s the clarity of the oboe (performed by ASO Principal Oboe Beth Sanders) that wins you over. Something shifts in the piece just after a series of violin solos halfway through, and the music seemed to lose its purpose for a while, but it’s absolutely persuasive enough to deserve a repeat listen...

—Review: [Austin 360](#) Austin Symphony Orchestra perform music by Austin composers, *American-Statesman* Staff, March 3, 2016



Composer Steven Serpa tapped a poet of his own era, Jeffery Beam, for “Creatures: A Bestiary Retold,” a work whose format recalled Camille Saint-Saëns’ *Carnival of the Animals* – musical settings of short poems, each devoted to a different beast – but which otherwise bore no more resemblance to that work than a wolf does a sheep. Unlike Ogden Nash’s whimsical epigrams for *Carnival*, Beam’s verses were mythic, mystical, cosmic in their evocation of creatures as diverse as beaver and unicorn, and Serpa complemented them

with a score of unexpected rhythms and musical lines. It created vocal challenges for soprano Maureen Broy Papovich and mezzo Chelsea DeLorenz, but they proved able guides through this strange menagerie.

—Theatre Critic and Arts Editor of the Austin Chronicle, **Robert Faires**, in the [Austin Chronicle](#), November 10, 2017.

Steven Serpa, with **Soprano Maureen Papovich** and **Mezzo-Soprano Chelsea Delorenz**, reflects on his works: *The Creatures: A Bestiary Retold*, *An Invocation*, and *Heaven's Birds*, Austin's One Ounce Opera, [Meet FSOAS '17 Winning Composer Steven Serpa](#)

.....I'm absolutely loving these pieces. I think my favorite thing about these songs is how dark parts of them are. So many songs about animals are cute and funny. I love how the poetry and music reflect a truer portrait of living beings (even the fantasy ones!) ... I'm also curious what drew you to Jeffrey Beam's poetry to begin with. You speak in the notes about your relationship with Lee Hoiby – which is so interesting – and you talk about your love of Beam's poetry, but not how you came to find his work and what about it moves you? ... What is it about Jeffery's poetry...

So 1st, these little monsters...

I'm glad to hear from you and glad you're enjoying the beast songs. I'm really looking forward to hearing what you do with these songs. After wrestling with the notes and rhythms on the bars of the music/cage, I've grown fond of these little monsters. Whether spikey or fuzzy, each animal has its beauty and light, their ugliness and darkness. I also think the Prologue is one of my favorite vocal things I've written! I'm looking forward to this. ... *The Creatures* is a work I have wanted to write for a bunch of years now. The poems are such entertaining gems. They are quirky mixtures of "scientific observation" and mysticism that Jeffery crafted from snippets of Elizabethan bestiaries. While Jeffery drew on the tradition of these medieval authors, I drew on the tradition of beast songs from the last century. So why did I choose the creatures I did? Some of the creatures I chose because composers before me had written really great works on them, like Poulenc's *Le Dromadaire* or Cage's *Litany for the Whale*. The others I was drawn to for the combination of myth and reality or of their beauty or power. Each creature has two sides, like all of us really: the Beaver has its sweet, playful quality but is also a crafty creature of the night– the Manticore is a dangerous man-eater with a radiant, clear voice. ... *The Creatures* is actually my third work with Jeffery's poetry. Last year the Austin Symphony Orchestra premiered my work *An Invocation*, a tone poem inspired by his poem of the same name. But the first time I came across his texts was in 2008 when I was writing a choral cantata for a World AIDS Day benefit in Boston. I was looking for text that possessed both memorial qualities but was also uplifting, and I found this absolutely perfect and inspiring poem:

Heaven's hounds guard your ashes now
Shine their green light
on a humbled earth

For every gray stone
alive with moss and left
unturned by your kind feet
Heaven's birds sing

That was my intro to Jeffrey Beam's work. Since then, I've extensively explored his poetry. It has inspired me and had me scheming new partnerships between his text and my music. On top of that, learning that Lee Hoiby, one of the best art song composers in the history of American song, learning that he had set Jeffrey's texts made me feel even more connected to the poetry. Lee was an early mentor to me. When I first started composing, he graciously looked over my songs and gave me words of criticism and support. I feel like these songs are a spiritual return to those early songs, and so I've dedicated them to Lee Hoiby's memory.

Daniel Thomas Davis and Andrea Edith Moore



Composer Daniel Thomas Davis



Soprano Andrea Edith Moore - photo credit Crickett Photography

OW: How did your composition style change to suit each text?

DTD: To be sure, each writer's text invited a distinct musical vocabulary. Some texts prompted a direct, folk-infused mode of expression featuring big tunes, chorus-verse structures, and banjo accompaniments, while others suggested a more atmospheric, richly orchestrated, and freely episodic music. With another text, which featured a strong sense of memory and nostalgia, I chose to write a prerecorded song for voice and banjo, which then plays on a record player through much of the scene, beneath the live music onstage (*Jeffery's Porch Song*). In working on this piece, I also felt my own sense of rhythm and tempo change according to each writer's sense of rhythm. Of course, as a composer, that rhythmic contrast proved to be very useful in pacing out the drama of the whole work.

—Q & A: Composer Daniel Thomas Davis on Creating 'Family Secrets: Kith and Kin' With 7 Librettists by David Salazar, [OperaWire](#), February 2018

Family Secrets: Kith and Kin is an opera consisting of produce, as it were, grown in North Carolina. The libretto is by seven esteemed southern writers, the music is by North Carolina born Daniel Thomas Davis, and the production and performance were realized at Burning Coal Theatre at the Murphy School in Raleigh by a cadre of superb talent mustered by North Carolina Opera and starring the shining light behind it all, the extraordinary soprano Andrea Edith Moore. ... The music, composed by Davis, offers clever lyricism, dramatic accompaniment, and unification of all elements of the production. Davis is riding an outstanding career with commissions and projects keeping him on the run. The performing musicians were Andru Bemis, banjo, Ariadna Ilika, violin, Nathan Leyland, cello, Bo Newsome, oboe and English horn, and Danny Spiegel, piano, all conducted by Vincent Povázsay. Their sensitive and skilled performance enriched every minute of the staging. ... Francesca Talenti was the director and stage designer. It was she who integrated music, text, scenery, and action into a coherent dramatic presentation, and it was superbly done. ... Experienced actress Jane Holding was outstanding in the roles of Housekeeper and Neighbor. ... The performance also featured multi-media elements from photographer Elizabeth Matheson and American Folk Art Buildings selected from the collection of W. Steven Burke and Randy Campbell. ... The roles of Girl, Mother, and Daughter were sung by Moore, who continues to wow audiences with her powerful and flexible soprano voice

and her acting ability, her dedication and drive, and her charm that enables such projects as this to be successful. ... *Family Secrets: Kith and Kin* deals with sin and guilt and fear and forgiveness. There are some stunning moments ... The ending sequence dealing with forgiveness gave Moore and Holding a duet opportunity: Moore singing in her rich soprano tones and Holding speaking in her generous contralto voice. It yielded a unique and ethereal effect. ... Throughout the opera were moments that revealed the creative instincts and performance skill of those involved in this production. It was a pleasant and fruitful experience to hear these gentle revelations of the inner lives of kith and kin ... In the question and answer session after the opera, there were opportunities for colleagues to express their admiration and appreciation for Moore, who was not only the vocal star but also the inspiration for the idea and the guide who saw it through to full realization. Indeed the accolades were well-deserved.

—[Family Secrets: Kith and Kin Reveals Worst and Best via the NC Opera Stage](#) by Ken Hoover, in *Classical Voice of North Carolina*, February 2018.

Tony Solitro



I've been working on *Love's Astronomy* this week, and I have a feeling you'll enjoy the setting. It has taken longer than I expected. I wanted it to be perfect—simple and elegant, but with kinetic cosmic energy and a veil of mystery. A few days ago, I spent about 4 hours singing the opening two lines over and over again. This morning, finally, the whole song came together. At first, I asked myself: "What took you so long?" ... but then I realized it wouldn't have flowed so freely if I hadn't spent several days wrapping my mind and heart around it, internalizing it, embodying it. Now, time for detail-work. That's where the magic happens.
—Tony Solitro in email to Jeffery, August 2018.

I'm planning to write a song as a gift for my close friend and his husband-to-be. On Steven's [Serpa] recommendation, I bought *The New Beautiful Tendons*. I love your writing—there are quite a few poems that I keep coming back to again and again. With your approval, I'd like to set *Love's Astronomy* for baritone and piano. There are a few other options that resonated with me, but that one seemed most fitting for the occasion.
—Tony Solitro in email to Jeffery, July 2018.

Holt McCarley



Holt McCarley, 2018

"The Hyena" is a cadenza-like, virtuosic piece for solo clarinet written in response to a poem of the same name by Jeffery Beam on the mythological attributes of this conniving, cackling creature. The work is my first true exploration into the world of 12-tone (though I'm often surprised by its jazzy undertones) and features long-winded chromatic passages that are interjected by onomatopoeic sequences that emulate the whooping and hollering of a hyena on the prowl. Many thanks to the talented Trevor Stewart for a stellar performance and to Jeffery Beam, whose words continue to haunt, tantalize, and inspire.

—Composer **Holt McCarley** on his piece, [The Hyena](#), SoundCloud.