

CAL-STATE-FULLERTON

CSUF composer pours lifetime of passions, concerns into her most ambitious work

Pamela Madsen debuting 'Oratorio for the Earth' in series of concerts



CSUF professor of music Pamela Madsen performs her multi-movement work Oratorio for the Earth in the Visitors Center at Crystal Cove State Park in Crystal Cove on Friday, Oct. 18, 2019. Madsen is the guest composer at Crystal Cove. (Photo by Kevin

Composer Pamela Madsen's path in life was influenced by events that happened long before she was born.

"My father was trained as a concert pianist. He became deaf during World War II, but he continued to play every day. He developed his sense of vibration as a way of 'hearing' the notes," said Madsen, a professor of music at California State Fullerton whose massive, multipart work, "Oratorio for the Earth," will make an extended debut in several concerts over the next year and a half.

Her father's innovative approach to music making deeply influenced Madsen. "I grew up hearing the world in a very sensitive way. I owe that to him—having this heightened sense of awareness to sound."

Madsen became super-attentive to the aural subtleties of the world around her, especially in nature.

"I grew up in New Jersey, but we spent our vacations in the wilderness where there were less distracting noises," she said. "Deep listening goes all the way back to my beginnings."

Madsen's unusual childhood led to an interest in composing and performing, and she studied with pioneering avant-garde composer and teacher Pauline Oliveros, who developed a deep-listening philosophy based on principles of improvisation, electronic music, ritual, teaching and meditation.

Oliveros co-founded the Deep Listening Band, which performed and recorded in caves, cathedrals, underground cisterns and other places that combined profound silence and unusual acoustical properties.

Madsen's relationship with Oliveros lasted more than three decades until the latter's death in 2016. (Madsen was composing a tribute to Oliveros that was completed on the day she died.)

"As a young woman composer there weren't very many role models for me," Madsen said. "Pauline became one—not as someone who wanted me to follow in her footsteps, but in other ways. She supported and believed in me, and I would talk to her regularly. I also went on deep-listening retreats with her."

Because of her love of nature and its rich orchestra of sounds, Madsen is an avid backpacker and hiker who has explored many parts of the American wilderness, especially the Desert Southwest. She is a frequent guest lecturer, composer-performer-improviser and invited scholar at universities and festivals throughout the globe.

Madsen is also deeply concerned about the current state of the natural world, which is one of the principal inspirations behind "Oratorio for the Earth." She has seen the dramatic effects of global warming in one of the world's coldest regions.

"In 2017 I was a resident composer in Siberia, and I did a lot of travelling; we went from Moscow to Perm to Yekaterinburg. I'd been to Siberia 10 years earlier, so I could see the contrasts. I was there in November, and there was no snow. I was seeing firsthand the devastation—loss of the permafrost, and seeing a massive unfrozen river that was usually covered in ice."

'A peoples's piece'

"Oratorio for the Earth" is ambitious in theme as well as length, addressing the importance of deep listening in the wilderness, the struggle for social justice, the primal relationship of our bodies to the earth, and the unseen bonds that interconnect humanity in large and small ways. It uses spoken text, field recordings of sounds in nature, traditional instruments, electronics, video and sung text.

These themes are not new to the veteran composer.

"I've been working, often collaboratively, on things that have to do with the environment since 2000. I worked with Judy Chicago in Los Angeles on her 'Envisioning the Future' project." (Chicago is a respected feminist artist, teacher and writer known for her large collaborative art installations that focus on birth and creation themes.) "I've also created a lot of pieces that have to do with social justice and the change that music can bring. Those are some of my concerns."

Madsen is director of the [CSUF New Music Ensemble](#) and she often debuts her work on campus, drawing from the large talent pool of students and colleagues.

"I often compose with specific performers in mind," she said.

Madsen has other fascinating local affiliations as well. She has been partnering with Crystal Cove Conservancy as a featured composer since 2012.

“I go back and forth with that issue,” she said. “I always have to question why I’m composing, why I have this need to be heard. The last thing I want to do is fill the world with more sounds that people don’t listen to. I try to make sure that my work does really engage people.”

This time, there’s no question in Madsen’s mind about the purpose of her work.

“The Oratorio for the Earth is really a people’s piece. It’s meant for the masses,” she said. “Parts of it could be played well by high school students; that’s the level I wrote for. It’s very direct and uncomplicated.”

But accessibility doesn’t mean watering things down, Madsen said.

“Everything I write still holds the signature of who I am; all my works have my voice. Even the simple works involve taking a very complex language and crystallizing it into the most direct expression of itself.”

Here is a schedule of Madsen’s upcoming work:

“Earth Horizon,” a three-part work, to be premiered by CSUF New Music Ensemble at 8 p.m. Nov. 14 at Meng Concert Hall. The piece includes I. Kama-River of Stars; II. Earth Horizon; III. There Will Be Stars.

“Oratorio for the Earth: Kama-River of Stars” for CSUF Symphony Orchestra, University Singers, Modern Medieval and bass-baritone Nicholas Isherwood. To be premiered May 9, 2020.

I. Lost Horse Mine Lament (premiere)

II. Center of Centers (premiere)

III. Tenebrae-Now the Hour Bows Down, for bass-baritone Nicholas Isherwood, electronics, video by Quintan Ana Wikswo (premiered Feb. 19). Orchestra/choral version

IV. Earth Horizon, for Amy Williams, Sarah Cahill, Pamela Madsen, Eric Dries, pianists; Kate Stenberg, violin (premiered Feb. 23). Orchestra/Choral version

Grace Notes, for ModernMedieval Vocal Trio (premiere)

“Oratorio for the Earth: The Land of Journey’s Beginning” for Brightwork newmusic/Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble: violin, flute, clarinet, cello, piano, percussion. To be premiered Feb. 26, 2020

For Two Sense: Ashley Bathgate, cello; Lisa Moore, piano; Brightwork New Music

To be premiered in 2021:

III. Journey to the Land of the Moon

IV. Medicine Wheel

V. Coyote on Holy Mesa

Tags: [Crystal Cove](#), [music](#)



SPONSORED CONTENT

Toxic Air: The Rise of Secondhand Smoke in the Outdoors [↗](#)

By CA Dept of Public Health

ca dept of public health

Cigarettes aren't the only things that generate harmful secondhand smoke. Here are the facts you need to...

Paul Hodgins

Paul D. Hodgins is a freelancer who previously worked at the Orange County Register since 1993. He spent more than two decades as the Register's theater critic, and for eight years he wrote about dance as well. Hodgins has also written for American Theatre, Variety, The Sondheim Review and Backstage West. Hodgins has also been active as an educator and scholar. He was the music director of the dance department at The University of California, Irvine from 1985-92 and served in similar positions at Eastern Michigan University,

holds a doctorate in musical composition and theory from the University of Southern California. He lives in Huntington Beach.

[Follow Paul Hodgins @octheaterguy](#)

VIEW COMMENTS

Join the Conversation

We invite you to use our commenting platform to engage in insightful conversations about issues in our community. Although we do not pre-screen comments, we reserve the right at all times to remove any information or materials that are unlawful, threatening, abusive, libelous, defamatory, obscene, vulgar, pornographic, profane, indecent or otherwise objectionable to us, and to disclose any information necessary to satisfy the law, regulation, or government request. We might permanently block any user who abuses these conditions.

If you see comments that you find offensive, please use the “Flag as Inappropriate” feature by hovering over the right side of the post, and pulling down on the arrow that appears. Or, contact our editors by emailing moderator@scng.com.