

# A Requiem For All

## Strata Vocal Ensemble Presents the Canadian Premiere of Stephanie Martin's *Requiem for All Souls* in Hamilton, Ontario

By Barbara Hampson



Stephanie Martin

"Stephanie's voice-leading is extraordinary! I see and hear twisty, mountain paths in her voice parts," says Laurel Forshaw, Strata Vocal Ensemble Conductor, of Martin's *Requiem for All Souls*.

You will want to mark November 24, 2019, in your calendar because Strata Vocal Ensemble is thrilled to be performing the Canadian premiere of this beautiful work by Canadian composer and conductor Stephanie Martin, which was commissioned by All Souls' Church in San Diego, California, and premiered on All Souls' Day, November 2, 2017.

### Text is Key

Martin's twenty-five-minute a cappella *Requiem for All Souls* is set to the traditional Latin text of the Requiem Mass. Ruben Valenzuela, Director of Music at All Souls' Church, describes the Requiem as a work of pure, beautiful vocal music grounded in traditional church music. In describing her composition, Martin says:

*I'm influenced by everything I experience. I've had the good fortune to sing, conduct, or play many great Requiems over the years. Big orchestral settings by Verdi, Mozart, Faure, Durufle, Britten, and the simpler, a cappella settings by Victoria, Howells, and of course the Gregorian chant setting. The common element I gleaned from all these composers was a real appreciation for the meaning of the words, and words are always my best guide in creating music.*

"I absolutely love how Stephanie's compositions serve the text, rather than the text serving the music," says Forshaw. "Her use of irregular phrase lengths and use of time to create space (aural and tonal) focusses the ear

on the text, the meaning of the text, and allows the singers to move freely through the text because of the skillful setting. To my ear, the text setting is almost conversational in feeling—it is natural and possesses an organic quality that comes from a composer who understands the voice and text in a profound way."

### A Cappella Setting

Why did Martin choose an a cappella setting? She explains:

*I had guest-conducted the Howells Requiem which is a gorgeous a cappella composition. I was definitely influenced by that—its uniquely human, expressive quality. A cappella music is pretty much in my blood. As a Mennonite who grew up with a cappella singing all around, as natural as breathing, and as an Anglican musician working at St Mary Magdalene's, where the choral repertoire is predominantly a cappella music from the Renaissance period, I have always reveled in the sound of the unadorned human voice. It's a texture that has infinite variety, and can express the text so well.*

### Chords of Colour

Forshaw admires Martin's approach to dissonances, the way she creates beautiful tonalities with skilled voice-leading:

*Stephanie leads the individual parts through these windy paths, where a stepwise turn by one or two voice parts, turning around a corner on the path, opens into a breathtaking vista. The*

most beautiful vistas are often the ones that catch us by surprise, perhaps augmented by their unexpected placement along the pathway. For me, I appreciate when a composer surprises me with chords of colour.

### **Beautiful, Versatile, and Accessible**

What makes Martin's Requiem so attractive for choirs? Says Martin:

*I very deliberately set some of the movements in a more challenging contrapuntal style, and some movements with a very straightforward chorale-like homophonic style. I was thinking of choral organizations who perhaps have several different groups at different levels. I also thought some of the music, in an actual funeral service, could be congregational.*

*I hope I created a really useful liturgical piece that gives conductors and choirs a chance to 'pick and choose' the movements that suit them. I can imagine some of the movements (like the "Kyrie" and "Pie Jesu") being used by congregations. They are very simple and easy to memorize. In fact, when I visited the Holy Land on a choir tour in March 2019, we were able to launch into the Kyrie quite spontaneously and sing it whenever we needed a meditative moment visiting awesome historical sites.*

Forshaw, who is keen to rehearse and perform this work, believes it is imperative that choral organizations seek to program new works, "to continually push the boundaries and expand the aural palette and horizons of ourselves and our audiences." Throughout her career, she has sought to champion Canadian works, particularly those written by women and equity-seeking groups:

*The process of working on a new work allows us, as an ensemble, to give thoughtful consideration to how we*

*approach each and every aspect of the piece—there are fewer preconceived ideas of what the final performance should sound like, so it frees us to dig in and discover, uncover, and expose the integral musicality of the work. To work from the ground up, so to speak, allows the ensemble to value their own sound in a way that is different from working on established repertoire.*



Laurel Forshaw

Martin notes that not every conductor is brave enough to try out new, Canadian music! "Your concert will be the Canadian premiere, though St James Cathedral choir in Toronto have already recorded the final movement." (Here's a link to that recording: <https://store.cdbaby.com/cd/thechoirofstjamescathedraltoro>.)

Adds Martin, "I'd be remiss if I didn't thank Ruben Valenzuela in California who commissioned this Requiem for his church choir in memory of their Priest. Without his vision and courage, this piece wouldn't exist."

In addition to the Canadian premiere of Martin's composition, on November 24 you will hear a variety of works by big name contemporary composers to complement the Requiem: the bright and sonorous "Ave Maria" by American composer Kevin Memley; Alejandro Consolacion's soulful "Alleluia"; Eric Whitacre's "Sleep"; Eriks Esenvalds "The Long Road"; John Tavener's moving and contemplative "Song for Athene"; and Billy Joel's exquisite ballad "And So It Goes."

Canadian composer and conductor Stephanie Martin is associate professor of music at York University's School of the Arts, Media, Performance and Design; director of [Schola Magdalena](#) (a women's ensemble for chant, medieval and modern polyphony); conductor emeritus of Pax Christi Chorale; and past director of music at the historic church of Saint Mary Magdalene in Toronto.

Laurel Forshaw is conductor of Strata Vocal Ensemble, past artistic director of the Dulcisono Women's Choir, and founder and artistic director of the Rafiki Youth Choir. Laurel holds a Master of Arts in Music Education (Choral Conducting) and Kodaly and Orff-Schulwerk certification from the University of St. Thomas, Manitoba, and is currently a PhD candidate in Music Education at the University of Toronto.

## What Dreams May Come

Nov 24, 2019. at 3 pm  
MacNeill Baptist Church,  
1145 King St W, Hamilton, Ontario

Tickets: \$25 (\$10 for under age 35)  
available online at: [http://  
www.stratavocalensemble.ca](http://www.stratavocalensemble.ca)



Strata Vocal Ensemble