

MASS TRANSMISSION

CHORAL WORKS BY
MASON BATES

Cappella SF

RAGNAR BOHLIN
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



DE 3573



MASS TRANSMISSION

Choral Works by Mason Bates

Cappella SF – Ragnar Bohlin, Conductor

Isabelle Demers, Organ

Mason Bates, Electronics

SIRENS: from *The Odyssey*, Book XII ♦ Die Lorelei ♦ Stelle, vostra mercè l'eccelse sfere ♦ Sirinu nuqa rikunia ♦ from *The Book of Matthew* ♦ from *The Odyssey*, Book XII

MASS TRANSMISSION: § The Dutch Telegraph Office ♦ Java ♦ Wireless Connections

Bonus track: **RAG OF RAGNAR:** §

§ World premiere recording

Total Playing Time: 54:24



MASS TRANSMISSION

Choral Works by Mason Bates

SIRENS (28:30)

1. I — from *The Odyssey*, Book XII (Homer) (4:06)
2. II — "Die Lorelei" (Heinrich Heine) (5:18)
3. III — "Stelle, vostra mercè l'eccelse sfere" (Pietro Aretino) (2:08)
4. IV — "Sirinu nuqa rikunia" (native Quechua) (5:21)
5. V — from *The Book of Matthew* (New Testament) (6:48)
6. VI — from *The Odyssey*, Book XII (4:49)

MASS TRANSMISSION *§ (22:24)

7. I — The Dutch Telegraph Office (10:32)
8. II — Java (5:53)
9. III — Wireless Connections (5:59)

10. Bonus track: **RAG OF RAGNAR** § (3:29)

Cappella SF

Ragnar Bohlin, Artistic Director and Conductor

Isabelle Demers, Organ *

Mason Bates, Electronica *

§ World premiere recording

Total Playing Time: 54:24

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM:

SIRENS

For 12-part a cappella chorus (2009)

The sirens, those mythical beings of the island of Circe, occupy a unique place in literature. Unlike other temptresses, their lure is art: a song of such overpowering beauty that it draws sailors to a rocky death.

Perhaps one thinks of lyrical, melodic music coming from sirens, but this cycle casts a wide net in exploring seduction music. For example, hypnotic and pulsing passages can also entrance, and this is the music that floats across the ocean to Odysseus in the work's beginning and end. This is followed by the simpler and more direct "Die Lorelei," a nineteenth-century poetic retelling of an ancient German myth about a siren singing atop a lofty riverside rock. The strophic form of Heine's poem is reflected in the music, which nods to his century's musical conventions. But the piece dissolves into a trance at the mention of her "strange, powerful melody."

But sirens do not always involve danger; in fact, they are sometimes personified as pure, heavenly beings emanating harmonious music. Pietro Aretino's sonnet pays homage to the stars, each of which is blessed with a lovely siren atop them

("Stelle"). In the central piece of the cycle, the earthy and rich world of the indigenous South American Quechua Indians associated sirens ("Sirinu") with equal parts mystery, temptation, and magic. The cycle goes furthest afield—at least on the dramatic level—with its inclusion of Christ's calling of the first disciples and perhaps the most intriguing (and haunting) line in history ("Book of Matthew").

—Mason Bates

The first of the two works by Mason Bates presented in this album explores—in multilingual words and music—varying perspectives and cultural manifestations of Sirens, whose irresistible utterances have the power to enthrall and attract those who hear (or observe) them. Written in 2009, the work was commissioned by the renowned Chanticleer vocal ensemble.

The earliest literary references to what we call sirens are enshrined in Homer's *Odyssey*. Bates lends haunting musical wings to these solemn bardic verses in movements I and VI, effectively evoking the irresistible lure of Circe's sirens.

The poetry set in Movement II, "Die Lorelei," traces its roots to another branch of mythology: that of ancient Germanic leg-

end—as depicted by Romantic-era poet Heinrich Heine, who found inspiration in German folklore. Words and music weave a web of sad enchantment as they depict the fatal song of the visually and aurally lovely Lorelei as, singing from her high perch, she lures helpless sailors to their deaths in the rocky reefs of the Rhine river. A much brighter depiction of sirens comes in Movement III, where the listener is treated to Renaissance-era Italian poet Pietro Aretino's evocation of the "sublimely sweet sound" of angelic sirens attached to each of the countless stars adorning the firmament. This lovely movement can be heard as the composer's manifestation of "the music of the spheres."

A sense of whimsical mischief and folkloric fantasy pervades Movement IV, depicting a rustic scene through the eyes (and language) of a South American Quechua Indian. Bates captures the dreamy essence and fleeting image of a colorful siren as it appears in a daydream to the poet. The question remains: Was this surreal vision purely a dream, or waking magic? The atmosphere is enhanced by the chorus's imitative "wuu-wuu" sounds of native Andean flutes.

Who has ever before characterized the biblical words of Jesus as those of a siren, albeit a spiritual one? Yet Bates has done

just that in Movement V, lending music of mysterious power and allure to Christ's holy utterances. What else but a siren could—with just a few words—captivate and entice two simple fishermen to spontaneously abandon their vocation and become devoted disciples of a total stranger, whose spirituality and ministerial mission on Earth they don't yet understand?

It's hard to imagine a conventional mixed choir effectively evoking such scenes as depicted throughout this utterly unique work (although there is a version for SATB chorus). Bates has thus scored these pieces as recorded here for a 12-part a cappella chorus, thereby achieving stunningly complex vocal textures, sonic images and throbbing aural effects. Sensitive listeners should prepare to be whisked away into wondrous new artistic milieus that they have never before experienced.

—Lindsay Koob

1. from *The Odyssey*, Book XII. (Homer)

Otisef...

*Nia katastison, ina noiterin opakousis
ou gar po tis tithe parilase nii meleni,
prin yi'meon meligirin apo
stomaton op akouse,
al o ye terpsamenos nite ky
e pliona ithos
Thevr'ayion polien Otisef,
mega kithos Aheon!*

Odysseus,

Bring in your ship and listen to our voices
For no one in a black ship has ever
passed us by
After hearing the ecstatic song
from our honey-dripping lips,
and then continued on his way, rejoicing,
To greater fortune.
Come, Odysseus, whom all praise
Great Glory of the Achaians!

2. "Die Lorelei" (Heinrich Heine)

*Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten,
Daß ich so traurig bin,
Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten,
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.
Die Luft ist kühl und es dunkelt,
Und ruhig fließt der Rhein;
Der Gipfel des Berges funkelt,
Im Abendsonnenschein.
Die schönste Jungfrau sitzet*

*Dort oben wunderbar,
Ihr gold'nes Geschmeide blitzet,
Sie kämmt ihr gold'nes Haar,
Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kamme,
Und singt ein Lied dabei;
Das hat eine wundersame,
Gewaltige Melodei.
Den Schiffer im kleinen Schiffe,
Ergreift es mit wildem Weh;
Er schaut nicht die Felsenriffe,
Er schaut nur hinauf in die Höh'.
Ich glaube, die Wellen verschlingen
Am Ende Schiffer und Kahn,
Und das hat mit ihrem Singen,
Die Lorelei getan.*

I do not know what it should mean,
or why I have been so sad.
But a tale from ancient times
will not leave my mind.
The air is cool at twilight,
and the Rhine flows quietly by;
the mountaintop shimmers
in the glow of the evening sun.

The most beautiful girl sits
wondrously up above;
her golden jewelry sparkles
as she combs her golden hair.
She combs it with a golden comb
while she also sings a song
that has a marvelous,
powerful melody.

The sailor in his ship
perceives it with wild woe;
he does not see the rocky shoals,
for he only gazes up into the heights.
I think, the waves swallowed
the sailor and his boat in the end;
and that, with her singing
The Lorelei made happen.

**3. "Stelle, vostra mercè l'eccelse sfere"
(Pietro Aretino)**

*Stelle, vostra mercè l'eccelse sfere
Dette del ciel sirene hanno concesso
A lei non solo in belle note altere,
Come titol gradito, il nome istesso,
Ma de la lor perfette armonie vere
Con suprema dolcezza il suono impresso
Ne le sue chiare e nette voci: ond'ella
Quasi in lingua de gli angioli favella.*

Stars, thanks to your exalted spheres,
the heavenly sirens have granted us
their beautiful, lofty melodies;
not only with the cherished title of
their names,
but also with their harmonies, perfect
and true,
impressing us with the sublimely
sweet sound of their voices,
ringing bright and clear:
almost in the language of the angels.

4. "Sirinu nuqa rikunia" (native Quechua)

*Sirinu nuqa rikuni a. Ajina parapi
chuqurkuspa.
Ajina puñuyta chuturqurikasqani.
Chaymanta: "wuu... wuu... mii." Libristuta!
Challtikujina rikuy kani, challku kay kinray
kay, kinray challkujina.
Chay Lurin arqiñan, chaypi, kuywapi
parapi chukusaq kani.
Chaypi jinapi puñuyta chutushasqani,
Puñuyta chutushaqtirqa: "wuu...
wuu... ata!"
Pinkillus "uj." Chay mirkamantaq sunarqa-
mun, karnawalqa.*

Yes, I saw the siren. Just like that, as I was
sitting in the rain,
just for a moment, while I was daydreaming.
Then: "wuu... wuu... mii." Honestly!
I saw it was indefinite in color, there on
the hill, with some strange color.
Over there, by Lorenzo's llama corral, I sat
in a cave, while it was raining.
And then, after I was carried off to sleep,
in the middle of my daydream: "wuu...
wuu... ata!"
The flutes sounded: "uj." They echoed
from the hollow, like at Carnival.

**5. from *The Book of Matthew*
(New Testament)**

Jesus was walking beside the Sea
of Galilee.

He saw two brothers: Simon and Andrew.
They were casting a net into the sea, for
they were fishermen.

And Jesus said: "Come, follow me, and I
will make you fishers of men."

The kingdom of heaven is like a net,
which was put into the sea, and took in
every sort of fish.

At once they left their nets, and
followed him.

6. from *The Odyssey*, Book XII (Homer)

Otisef...

Nia katastison, ina noiterin opakousis.

Ithmen gar ti panthos eni Trii evrii

Argii Troes te theon iotiti mogisan

Ithmen th'osa genite

epithoni poulivotiri

Thevr'ayion polien Otisef

mega kithos Aheon

Odysseus,
bring in your ship, listen to our voices.
Indeed, we know that on the plain
of Troy,
Argives and Trojans suffered by order of
the gods,
and we know everything that occurs

upon this bounteous earth.
Come, Odysseus, whom all praise,
Great glory of the Achaians!

MASS TRANSMISSION

For SATB chorus, soloists, organ, and electronics (2011)

Commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony for their 2012 Mavericks Festival, *Mass Transmission* brings to life the true story of a distantly separated mother and daughter speaking over the first long-distance radio transmissions between Holland and Java. Ethereal choral sonorities processed through a haze of radio static unfold into virtuosic organ toccatas. The texts for outer movements—from the eyes of the mother—are adapted from an obscure 1928 government publication about the technological advances made by the Dutch in communicating with their colonists. The text for the central portion of the work, from the eyes of the daughter, is adapted from the diary of a Dutch girl growing up in Java.

—Mason Bates

For those who are unfamiliar with the music of Mason Bates, *Mass Transmission*—the second of the composer's works featured in this album—is an ideal introduction to his frequent application of electronics in many of his compositions, alongside more conventional performing forces. Bates carefully tailors the sonic content of his “electronica” to match the thematic content of the words and music alike, adding vivid aural imagery and authentic atmosphere via carefully sequenced sound bites.

Since the composition's scenarios alternate between the early twentieth-century Netherlands and what is now Indonesia—with the two outer movements mimicking early radio transmissions—the electronica consists of a unique mix of field recordings of jungle sounds, bird-song and Javanese Gamelan music, with samples of static radio noise that depict the sounds of the radio transmissions. The end result is a fascinating and often otherworldly blend of shimmering choral textures, virtuosic organ passages and solo passages that sometimes sound as if they are on the verge of being drowned out by the intense radio static.

The scenarios take us back to the waning years (the 1920s) of the Netherlands' centuries-old colonies known collectively as

the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). Colonial administrators in Holland often sent their own children to the colonies to serve as pages for local governing officials. But by that time, the advent of the radio enabled real-time vocal communication between parents and their children—12,000 kilometers apart—for the first time. As Bates has put it,

“I think of those early transmissions as the Skype of the 1920s. Today, trying to communicate with my son and wife through a technological medium that remains imperfect really made me receptive to this story.”

Here—as Bates has explained in his brief opening notes above—the transmissions are between a mother in Holland (in the “cold” and “lifeless” Dutch telegraph office), and her much-missed daughter in Java. The words of the opening movement are the mother's, as she attempts to connect with her child across many thousands of miles...and the movement comes to its close just as her daughter's voice comes back to her.

By contrast, the second movement is a tranquil choral interlude, where the daughter's words reflect the marveling wonder of her life amid her pastoral surroundings in Java: her colorful house, the

smells and noises of the jungle and playing with other children—all suffused with the sampled sounds of gamelan music from a nearby village, complete with native drums and tuned bells. But a hint of the daughter's homesickness comes toward the end, just before the music shifts back to the third movement's touching mother-daughter conversation.

Even in the face of the underlying haze of radio static, the sweetness of the third movement's dialogue comes across in full force, revealing anew the depth of the fathomless bond between mother and child. And therein lies Bates' most significant achievement in this marvelous piece. Amid all its meticulously crafted music and electronic wizardry, what shines through the brightest is the intense love-driven emotion that the work radiates from beginning to end.

In "Rag of Ragnar," the album's bonus track, Mason has remixed elements of the work's choral and electronic sound-worlds into a beguiling "mashup" meant as a tribute to his friend and collaborator Ragnar Bohlin, who made this recording possible.

—Lindsay Koob

7. Movement I: The Dutch Telegraph Office

The miracle still lies in my memories like a dream.

Slowly layers of mystery unfold. Gradually my eyes alight as if recovering from a dream.

A bit fearfully, I speak into the microphone:

"Hello? Hello? Are you there, my child?"

12000 Kilometers, not a single wire.

The air is what transmits the message.

A miracle.

My voice travels to the Indies, which took my daughter weeks to reach on a steamboat.

Days and nights, the endless sea around her.

Now I can speak to that distant land, and my voice travels there wirelessly.

"Hello! Hello! Are you there, my child?"

But the reality around me is sober and mechanical.

I'm in the headquarters of the Dutch Telegraph Office, in a small lifeless studio.

A strange apparatus before me. A technician nearby.

The earphones, the microphone on the armchair. It is very cold.

This is where Holland converses with its colonists in Java.

My child was sent to be a page in the government in Java. It is a great honor, but it is hard on a mother. I speak into the microphone: "Hello! Hello! My child? In a single second, I have crossed 12000 kilometers, as if it were the distance between two rooms. And within that second, my daughter's voice comes back:

8. Movement II: Java

What I love most about Java are the moments I wake up.
I stay just a little longer in bed to listen to all the tropical noises.
Birds twittering and monkeys echoing through the humid jungle.
I hear soft, strange, beautiful music coming from the village.
Gamelan music. Then I go outside, enjoying the fresh morning fragrance and admiring all those colorful flowers and the Durian trees.
My house is built on poles and made of stone and bamboo.
The doors and windows are painted green. On top of the house is a red zinc roof.
Underneath the house
I often hide with the other children.
Sometimes we go into the jungle.
It is always hot and magical, and it always has a special smell —

a bit of snakes and all sorts of plants.
I watch my steps
in this strange, lovely kingdom.
This world is so unreal,
like a paradise or Eden.
In the evening, lying in my bed,
I listen again to the gamelan in the village, and I miss you.
You are so far away.

9. Movement III: Wireless Connections

Are you there mum?
Yes, dear. I can definitely recognize your voice!
Is everything fine with you, mum?
Yes, my child ... so good to hear your voice.
I miss you mum!
I miss you too, my child.
Well ... it is hot here in Java.
And it's storming here in Holland!
Is grandpa with you?
No, he could not come.
Okay, have a good night mum.
Good night, dear.
The voice from the East.
Nothing is further apart than the straits that separate us.
In this way the world grows closer and closer, even as we move further apart.
Each phone call was allowed to last six minutes at most.
Six minutes, it seemed far too short.
The six minutes passed, and the

voice comes to a halt.
The headphone is silent,
the microphone lies on the table
in the Dutch Telegraph Office.
Later, when I lie in my white bed,
I can still hear my child's voice:
the memory, the ecstasy.
No poem, no music is more beautiful
than that voice. Holland and Java lie
in the deepest part of a mother's heart,
and in every sigh is a wireless signal:
Hello, oh, my child...

As of this recording's release, Grammy award-winning **Mason Bates** is Composer-in-Residence at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Musical America named him the 2018 Composer of the Year as well as the most-performed composer of his generation. His music has been championed by such legendary conductors as Riccardo Muti, Michael Tilson Thomas and Leonard Slatkin. His symphonic music is gaining widespread acceptance for its unprecedented integration of electronic sounds and sampling with conventional orchestral instruments. He has collaborated with orchestras in Chicago, Miami (New World), St. Paul, Pittsburgh and Sydney, among others. His recent opera, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, was singled out as one of the most popular productions in the history of



Santa Fe Opera, and it received the 2019 Grammy award in the Best Opera Recording category.

Being also a DJ and a curator, Bates has become a pioneer in bringing contemporary music to new and unconventional spaces, via institutional partnerships like his former residency with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as well as through his club/classical project Mercury Soul,

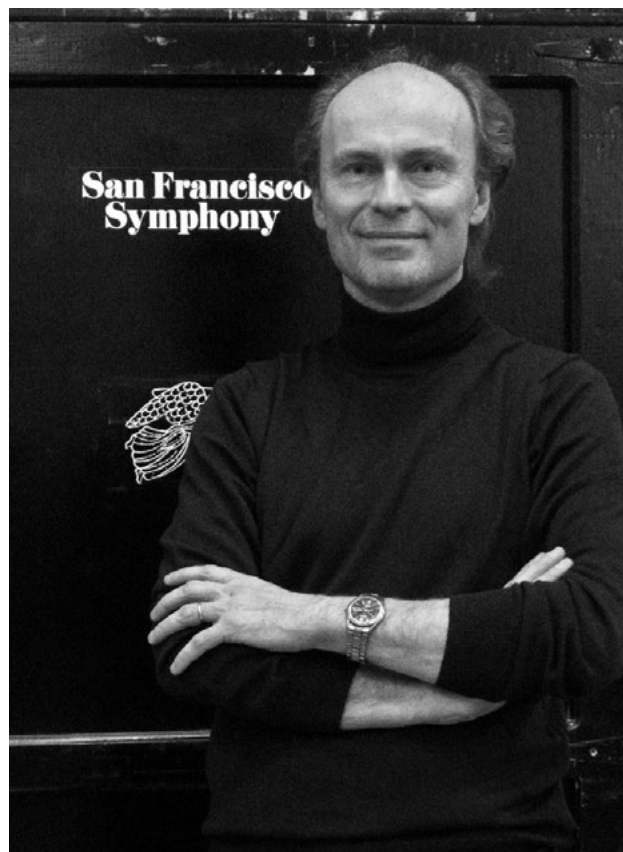
which presents fascinating hybrid musical happenings in commercial clubs. He has also composed for movies, including Gus Van Sant's *The Sea of Trees*. He serves as a faculty member at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He is a graduate of Columbia-Juilliard and UC Berkeley.

Ragnar Bohlin founded the professional chamber choir Cappella SF in 2013, and has been its conductor and artistic director ever since.

Having served as Chorus Director for the San Francisco Symphony since 2007, Mr. Bohlin prepares the chorus for performances under internationally renowned conductors and has also conducted such pieces as Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and *Mass in B Minor*, as well as Poulenc's *Figure humaine*. His superlative work has been recognized with a Grammy award for Best Choral Performance in Mahler's Symphony No. 8, with the San Francisco Symphony under the baton of Michael Tilson Thomas.

Mr. Bohlin has often served as guest conductor with the renowned Swedish Radio Choir—and, in 2010, conducted them on their tour of the United States as well as in 2018 in Stockholm. He has also worked

with the Eric Ericson Chamber Choir and the Opera Chorus of Stockholm, as well as other leading Swedish ensembles—several of which he has led on international tours. He has earned prizes in international competitions, and has been awarded such distinctions as the prestigious Johannes Norby Medal (in 2006) for expanding the frontiers of Swedish choral music making. Bohlin made his Carnegie Hall debut conducting Brahms' *Ein deutsches*



Requiem in 2010, and guest conducting engagements have brought him broad international exposure in many parts of the world, including both North and South America as well as in Europe. In 2015 he also served as Guest Music Director for the renowned Chanticleer ensemble, and made his debut with the BBC Singers in January of 2018.

Mr. Bohlin has studied conducting with renowned teacher Jorma Panula and the legendary choirmaster Eric Ericson; piano with Peter Feuchtwanger in London on a British Council scholarship; and singing with the great Swedish tenor Nicolai Gedda. Mr. Bohlin is also on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Isabelle Demers is Assistant Professor of Organ at Baylor University, where she teaches applied organ and other courses in the organ curriculum. Dr. Demers holds the BM in piano and organ from Le Conservatoire de Musique de Montréal, as well as MM and DMA from the Juilliard School, where she studied with Paul Jacobs. As of this release, she has concertized extensively worldwide, including engagements at the cathedrals of Cologne and Regensburg in Germany, St. Paul's Cathedral and the Royal Festival Hall in London, as well as major venues in Oman, Australia and



New Zealand. She has also appeared at major universities and concert halls in the United States, among them Davies Hall (San Francisco), Disney Hall (Los Angeles), the Kimmel Center (Philadelphia), the Wanamaker Organ (Philadelphia), Yale University, and the Eastman School of Music. She has recorded four CDs for the labels Pro Organo and Acis, with three more projects in production as of this recording's release.

Cappella SF—the professional chamber choir founded in 2013 by choirmaster Ragnar Bohlin—was brought together for the purpose of bringing the magic of a cappella music from all stylistic periods to the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond in performances at the very highest artistic levels. Members of the ensemble are veterans of the leading professional choral groups of the San Francisco Bay Area, including Chanticleer, Philharmonia Baroque Chorale, American Bach Soloists and the choruses of San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco Opera. Its members teach, lead ensembles and appear as soloists throughout the Bay Area and beyond. The ensemble's San Francisco debut performance in February 2014

drew standing ovations from a capacity crowd. One reviewer wrote: "Rarely have I ever heard choral music performed with such clarity, balance, musicality and sheer grace. The sound of the chorus itself just seems to get better and better, with something clear and precise, yet mellow about it; a sort of amber luster and clarity." In only five years, Cappella SF has presented a wide range of repertoire and musical styles, including world premieres of eleven new works. The ensemble's discography features four recordings on Decca: The first, *Light of Gold—Cappella SF Christmas*, was released in 2015. *Facing West: Choral Music of Conrad Susa and David Conte* followed in 2016, and *Timeless: Ten Centuries of Music*, appeared in 2018.



Mass Transmission soloists:

Cara Gabrielson, soprano

Silvie Jensen, mezzo-soprano

Cappella SF singers:

Soprano:

Jennifer Ashworth

Kelly Ballou

Katelan Bowden

Cheryl Cain

Cara Gabrielson

Michele Kennedy

Crystal Kim

Elizabeth Kimble

Alto:

Kristina Blehm

Silvie Jensen

Flora Mendoza

Gail Nakano

Leandra Ramm

Meghan Spyker

Nicole Takesono

Heidi Waterman

Cindy Wyvill

Tenor:

Elliott JG Encarnación

Samuel Faustine

Kevin Gibbs

Jonathon Hampton

Michael Jankosky

Ben Jones

Jimmy Kansau

Ryan Peterson

Jonathan Thomas

Bass:

Eric Alatorre

Daniel Brakefield

Peter Dennis

Clayton Moser

Mathew Peterson

Chung-Wai Soong

Mark Sumner

Nick Volkert

Special thanks: This recording is made possible in part with support from Michèle and Larry Corash, Melissa and Larry Lasky, and from Meredith Riekse. Thanks are also due to engineer David v.R. Bowles, whose challenging work on this recording was artistry in itself.

Recorded in January and March 2018 at St. Ignatius Church and Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

Recording production, engineering, editing and mastering: David v.R. Bowles (Swines-head Productions LLC)

Assistant Engineer: Bobby Borisov

Executive Director: Cortlandt Fengler

Assistant Chorus Manager: Elizabeth Kimble

Front cover design: Jaime Raba

Booklet editor: Lindsay Koob

Program notes: Mason Bates and Lindsay Koob

Booklet design, layout, and rear cover design: Lonnie Kunkel

Photography credits: Mason Bates' booklet photo by Kate Warren; rear cover photo by Todd Rosenberger. Ragnar Bohlin: Steve Somerstein. Isabelle Demers: Geoffrey Silver
Cappella SF group shot: Roy Manzanares

The cover photograph, entitled "Radio Kootwijk," is by Lennart Tange, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>. The building, from the 1920s, housed the telegraph office that was used for Dutch transmissions to the country's colonies. The building, located in a tiny town in the Netherlands, was destroyed by the Nazis at the end of World War II. The surrounding text and graphics were added by Jaime Raba.