

# Program Notes: *For All Our Sisters*

by Dr. Paula Maust

“History is written by the victors,” or so the saying goes. While we have often interpreted historical events through the eyes of those with the most privilege and power, significant progress is currently being made towards reshaping our narratives to include the perspectives of previously silenced voices.

*For All Our Sisters* seamlessly melds poetry, music, and dance to showcase the viewpoints of women in scenarios where men have historically had the predominant narrative power. Music from the early modern period combined with contemporary works about female characters from Greek and Roman mythology opens a window into the experiences of women past and present.

In Michel Pignolet de Montéclair’s 1713 *Pan et Syrinx*, the Arcadian nymph Syrinx has taken a vow of chastity and pledged her loyalty to the hunter goddess Diana. One day while roaming through the forest, Syrinx encounters Pan, the Arcadian god of the woods. Pan immediately pursues Syrinx. To help her escape his unwelcome advances, Syrinx’s sisters turn her into a set of reed pipes for eternity. Montéclair’s contemporaries were impressed by his text painting, which he achieved by using a variety of instrumental colors and musical devices. This is particularly evident in the jagged rhythms that accompany the hunting scene and in the poignant air where Pan mournfully plays the reed pipes.

Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre was a harpsichordist, salonnière, and the first woman composer to have an opera performed at the Paris Opéra. With the support of Louis XIV, she also published keyboard works, instrumental chamber music, and cantatas. Her 1715 *Semélé* is a dramatic rendition of the title character’s demise. In a tale of jealousy and revenge, Juno tricks the mortal princess Semele into asking Jupiter to appear before her in his full glory as the god of thunder. Juno is secretly enraged that Jupiter has impregnated Semele. Her plot ensures that Semele will be fatally consumed by the flames from Jupiter’s lightning. Like other French cantatas of the time, Jacquet de la Guerre masterfully blends recitatives, airs, and instrumental interludes to create an operatic drama.

Mythological sirens are most often described by male sailors as dangerous seductresses whose enchanting singing lures unsuspecting seafarers to their deaths. By exploring the origins of the siren myth, poet Jennifer Bullis goes beyond the surface to tell the story from the siren’s perspective. *Honey-sweet we sing for you*, with music by Seattle-based composer Aaron Grad and text by Bullis, was co-commissioned by Burning River Baroque and Early Music Seattle in 2018. The cantata is a fresh interpretation of the siren myth that intricately combines historical instruments and eighteenth-century cantata conventions with powerful contemporary compositional techniques.

Soprano Danielle Sampson and flutist Janet See recorded improvisations on musical themes from *Honey-sweet we sing for you*, which Grad has merged into *On this Rocky Island*. This new electronic work incorporates improvised dance. The rich tapestry of stories about women’s experiences in *For All Our Sisters* highlights the profound importance of retelling history in a way that incorporates a myriad of viewpoints.

## About Dr. Paula Maust



Dr. Paula Maust is a performer, scholar, and educator dedicated to fusing research and creative practice to amplify underrepresented voices and advocate for social change. She is the creator of Expanding the Music Theory Canon, an open-source collection of music theory examples by women and composers of color. A print anthology based on the project is under contract with SUNY Press, and she is working on a large-scale recording project to create professional recordings of all works on the site that have not yet been commercially recorded. Her other research focuses on the pejorative language used to describe early modern women on stage in England, France and Italy. Paula has published articles in *Women and Music* and the *Journal of the International Alliance for Women in Music*, and she has presented her research at conferences of the American Musicological Society, the Society for Seventeenth-Century Music, the American Handel Society, and the Indiana University Historical Performance Institute.

As a harpsichordist and organist, Paula has been praised for combining “great power with masterful subtlety” (DC Metro Theater Arts) and as a “refined and elegant performer” (Boston Musical Intelligencer). As the co-director of *Musica Spira*, she curates provocative lecture-concerts connecting baroque music to contemporary social issues focused on women. Paula performs extensively as a continuo player with numerous ensembles in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. region, including the Washington Bach Consort, the Folger Consort, and the Handel Choir of Baltimore.

Paula is an Assistant Professor of Music Theory at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, where she teaches courses in baroque and renaissance counterpoint, classical form, and expanding the canon. Prior to her appointment at Peabody, she taught music theory, keyboard skills, and performance courses at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and in the Peabody @ Homewood program. She holds degrees in harpsichord from Peabody (DMA '19, MM '16) and in organ from the Cleveland Institute of Music (MM '12) and Valparaiso University (BM '09). Her teachers include Adam Pearl, Webb Wiggins, Todd Wilson, and Lorraine Brugh.