

University of Iowa, School of Music

## Center for New Music

D. Martin Jenni - Director  
David Karl Gompper - Music Director

### Mirabai Songs

John HARBISON

Laura KOENIG - alto flute  
Marla FEENEY - clarinet  
Pam WEEST-CARRASCO - harp  
Michael GEARY - percussion  
Mitchell JOHNSON - violin  
Amy GETTER - viola  
Jennifer NEUMAN - violoncello  
Mario CHIARELLO - Double Bass  
Marcia ROBERTS - soprano  
David GOMPPER - conductor

*Eugene Korte  
Logo III*

**Mirabai Songs** (1982) are based on the ecstatic religious poetry of Mirabai, a legendary poet of sixteenth-century India. When Mirabai was twenty-seven, her husband was killed in a war. Instead of joining him on his funeral pyre, as was the custom, she left her family compound, wrote her poems to Krishna, the Dark One, and sang and danced them in the streets. Where most European traditions tend to isolate the spiritual insight into a solitary, contemplative experience, Mirabai achieves her ecstatic state amidst the dusty, crowded streets and markets of India. She is alternately exultant, angry, mournful, seductive and reflective.

Harbison, fascinated by the works of the Indian poet, found a small-press edition of six Mirabai poems adapted by Robert Bly, and began to compose musical settings. He explains that "the combination of the religious and erotic, so seldom encountered in our culture, first drew me into these settings." Harbison initially favored an instrumental ensemble, then settled on a setting for voice and piano. A year later, he returned to his original intentions and prepared a version for voice and an ensemble of eight players.

**John HARBISON** (b. 1938, Orange, New Jersey) studied at Harvard College and Princeton University before joining the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1969. He is the first permanent holder of the Class of 1949 Professorship at MIT. From 1982 to 1984, at the request of Andre Previn, he was composer-in-residence with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and from 1985 to 1987 held the same position at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, continuing his association with Previn.

Harbison has received commissions from the Koussevitzky, Fromm, Naumburg, and Rockefeller foundations, as well as from many performing organizations, including anniversary commissions for the Boston Symphony (100th), New Haven Symphony (90th), and San Francisco Symphony (75th). His music has been performed by such organizations as the Aspen and Berkshire festivals, the San Francisco Opera, the New Opera Company (England), the New York Philharmonic, and the Fires of London. Recordings of Harbison's music are available on Nonesuch, CRI, Northeastern and New World. Harbison's cantata, *The Flight into Egypt* received the Pulitzer Prize for music in 1987.

**Marcia ROBERTS**, mezzo-soprano, has compiled an impressive concert and oratorio repertoire, including works of Bach, Copland, Elgar, Handel, Mozart, Rossini and Vaughan Williams. She has performed with the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra, the American Symphony, the Bach Aria Festival at Stony Brook and the Aspen Music Festival. Co-founder of the *Bach 131 Chamber Ensemble* and an accomplished recital artist, Ms. Roberts often features instrumental and chamber music and a wide variety of American music, as well as traditional repertoire. She has premiered works by Chester Biscardi, Gloria Coates, David Ott and James Ure, and presented the world premiere of several Charles Loeffler songs at New York's Merkin Concert Hall. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Ms. Roberts is a member of the School of Music faculty at DePauw University.

The **Center for New Music** at the University of Iowa is the focus of contemporary composition and performance at the University of Iowa. The Center, like the internationally renowned Writers Workshop, embodies the institution's commitment to the vital role of the creative arts at the frontiers of human experience.

The Center is a resident performance ensemble. It functions as a laboratory and performance extension of the School's composition area, and as a repertory ensemble for the creation and presentation of new music in general. Depending on funding, the size of the core ensemble has varied from as many as 26 persons (including a vocal ensemble of 12) to as few as seven players. Extra players are hired on occasion in order to present larger-scale compositions. The Center also serves as the locus of activities for guest composers whose visits range from a few days to entire academic terms.



### **It's True I Went to the Market**

My friend, I went to the market and  
bought the Dark One.  
You claim by night, I claim by day.  
Actually I was beating a drum all the time  
I was buying him.  
You say I gave too much; I say too little.  
Actually I put him on a scale before I  
bought him.  
What I paid was my social body, my town  
body, my family body, and all my  
inherited jewels.  
Mirabai says: The Dark One is my  
husband now.  
Be with me when I lie down; you  
promised me this in an earlier life.

### **All I Was Doing Was Breathing**

Something has reached out and taken in  
the beams of my eyes.  
There is a longing, it is for his body, for  
every hair of that dark body.  
All I was doing was being, and the Dancing  
Energy came by my house.  
His face looks curiously like the moon,  
I saw it from the side, smiling.  
My family says: "Don't ever see him  
again!" And imply things in a  
low voice.  
But my eyes have their own life; they laugh  
at rules, and know whose they are.  
I believe I can bear on my shoulders what-  
ever you want to say of me.  
Mira says: Without the energy that lifts  
mountains, how am I to live?

### **Why Mira Can't Go Back to Her Old House**

The colors of the Dark One have  
penetrated Mira's body; all the other  
colors washed out.  
Making love with the Dark One and eating  
little, those are my pearls and my  
carnelians.  
Meditation beads and the forehead streak,  
those are my scarves and my rings.  
That's enough feminine wiles for me. My  
teacher taught me this.  
Approve me or disapprove me: I praise the  
Mountain Energy night and day.

I take the path that ecstatic human beings  
have taken for centuries.  
I don't steal money, I don't hit anyone.  
What will you charge me with?  
I have felt the swaying of the elephant's  
shoulders; and now you want me to  
climb on a jackass? Try to be serious.

### **Where Did You Go?**

Where did you go, Holy One, after you left  
my body?  
Your flame jumped to the wick, and  
then you disappeared and left the  
lamp alone.  
You put the boat into the surf, and then  
walked inland, leaving the boat in the  
ocean of parting.  
Mira says: Tell me when you will come to  
meet me.

### **The Clouds**

When I saw the dark clouds, I wept, Oh  
Dark One, I wept at the dark clouds.  
Black clouds soared up, and took some  
yellow along; rain did fall, some rain  
fell long.  
There was water east of the house, west of  
the house; fields all green.  
The one I love lives past those fields; rain  
has fallen on my body, on my hair, as  
I wait in the open door for him.  
The Energy that holds up mountains is the  
energy Mirabai bows down to.  
He lives century after century, and the test  
I set for him he has passed.

### **Don't Go, Don't Go**

Don't go, don't go. I touch your soles, I'm  
sold to you.  
No one knows where to find the bhakti  
path, show me where to go.  
I would like my own body to turn into a  
heap of incense and sandalwood and  
you set a torch to it.  
When I've fallen down to fray ashes, smear  
me on your shoulders and chest.  
Mira says: You who lift the mountains,  
I have some light, I want to mingle it  
with yours.

*Translations by Robert Bly.*