

## Kenn Willson *pianist*

There once was a Montana lad growing up in the town of Big Timber near the Yellowstone Valley, who taught himself to read music when he was six. Kenn spent four years playing piano on his own before a teacher was finally corralled to begin his formal training. He took well to instruction and in due time moved to Oregon to pick up first his BA and then his Master of Music degree in Piano Performance. His thirst for education still unquenched, Willson ventured off to the University of Northern Colorado for a Doctor of Arts degree in Piano Performance and Pedagogy. He employs the latter skill as Associate Professor of Music at George Fox University, the former as keyboardist for Southminster Presbyterian Church, and in concerts and recordings as the starting right tackle of the piano duo Ivory Crush. Willson has won acclaim for his digital command, his versatility, his teamwork, and his sense of humor.

## Maria Choban *pianist*

Maria was born in Oregon to Greek parents. She began picking out tunes on a toy piano at age three, started formal lessons at age 6 and was winning competitions by her teens. She was a founding member of the iconoclastic trio St. Elvis. In 1996 she won fellowships for a research trip to Greece, the fruits of which have been the creation of The Greek Music Project for her Fireflight label which has just released her first solo recording, Greek Rapture, featuring music by Kalomiris, Papaioannou, and Hadjidakis.

## About Ivory Crush

Ivory Crush is the team of pianists Kenn Willson and Maria Choban, whose goal is to rescue music for four hands, whether on one piano or two, from its status as a sadly neglected step-child. Ivory Crush aims to bring a wider audience to music that, can still, under the right twenty fingers, astonish, rouse, and delight.

## About Fireflight



Fireflight's mission is to bring the listening public music nearly no one knows that almost anyone can enjoy. We search out the gifted composers whose faces never made it onto plaster busts, the musicians who should be living legends but somehow aren't. We offer serious music that has never won fame, despite its evident power to astonish, rouse, and delight.

*Fireflight: Great music that missed the bandwagon, performed with the passion it deserves.*

Ivory Crush *Kenn Willson and Maria Choban, piano*

## Gifts from three kings



Christmas Settings for Piano—Four Hands

### Program

- 1-6 Douglas Townsend (World premier recording) [18:56]
- 1 Fantasy on the Christmas Carol "Il est ne" (traditional) [2:11]
- 2 God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman (traditional) [1:29]
- 3 Silent Night (Hans Gruber) [3:17]
- 4 Fantasy on the Coventry Carol (anonymous) [4:51]
- 5 Fantasy on the Christmas Carol "Here We Go A-Wassailing" (traditional) [3:03]
- 6 All Through the Night (traditional) [3:54]

- 7-13 Appalachian Christmas Carols (After John Jacob Niles) by Vincent Persichetti [7:13]
- 7 Down in Yon Forest [0:35]
- 8 The Cherry Tree [0:54]
- 9 The Seven Joys of Mary [1:11]
- 10 Jesus, Jesus, Rest Your Head [2:08]
- 11 Jesus Born in Beth'ny [0:40]
- 12 Lulle Lullay [0:41]
- 13 Jesus the Christ Is Born [0:56]

- 14-20 Christmas Music Transcribed for Piano—Four Hands, set or written by Norman Dello Joio [12:35]
- 14 O, Come All Ye Faithful (John Reading; 17th century) [1:32]
- 15 The Holy Infant's Lullaby (Norman Dello Joio) [1:59]
- 16 God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen - (Traditional) [1:21]
- 17 A Christmas Carol (Norman Dello Joio) [1:59]
- 18 Silent Night (Franz Gruber) [1:57]
- 19 Bright Star (Light of the World) (Norman Dello Joio) [1:57]
- 20 Hark! The Herald Angels Sing (Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy) [1:30]



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## Home Brew

On the one hand there is music written to win a prize, fulfill a commission, make a name. The music on this disk isn't that sort. This is what we call Home Brew, written to be played in private by the avid amateur. In Home Brew, ambition takes a back seat to pleasure, and craft takes precedence over academic fashion. And what can be homier than a score that lets a pair of family members sit down together at the piano to play out variations on familiar holiday tunes? This visit from our three composer-kings shows them not holding court or issuing decrees, but instead bearing gifts suitable for a holy family, but not too posh for the humblest abode. Here they employ their artistry as so many great masters before them have done, taking well-known themes and spinning them out into something new, handcrafting familiar materials into gifts for the household.

## DOUGLAS TOWNSEND (1921–)

The career track of Douglas Townsend is the least conventional, of our composer-kings, with fewer flashy triumphs and more adventure. Although he began with the successes typical of those who go on to win lasting fame—victory in a nationwide contest for student composers followed by a national radio broadcast of his winning piece, studies with Tibor Serly and Stefan Wolpe, a piano composition performed at Carnegie Hall, a scholarship to study with Copland—Townsend never quite broke through into a major career. He also neglected to secure the usual consolation prize of the college degree he would need for a secure teaching post. Instead Townsend raised a family while moving from one part-time college teaching job to the next. Along the way he turned himself into a world-class musicologist, who uncovered lost works by Rossini and Donizetti, and has become one of the world's leading advocates for Czerny's neglected music. He became known to record collectors during his term as editor of the monthly organ of the Musical Heritage Society. Townsend's work as a composer reflects both his independence of spirit and a devotion to music that can be played and enjoyed by the interested amateur. The selections on this disk— as yet unpublished and here given their first performance on recording— display his ability to reset traditional songs in ways that enhance, rather than overshadow, their melodic appeal.

## VINCENT PERSICHETTI (1915–1987)

The ways of fame are curious. Within the small community that never stopped caring about contemporary composers Persichetti is known as one of the most brilliant and accomplished American composers of the 20th century. But the average classical fan can scan past Persichetti's name without the slightest inkling that he is in the forefront of the pack of talented composers who somehow just missed the wider fame accorded to Copland and Barber. Music fans who see an Italian name think of Vivaldi or Puccini and often mistake Persichetti for their compatriot. In fact, Persichetti was born in Philadelphia. He began studying piano at age five, by 11 was a paid professional, by 14 had written the earliest of his many published works, and by the age of 20 was head of the theory and composition departments at the Combs College of Music. This blazing start led in time to a faculty position at Juilliard, to over 100 commissions, and to an assortment of awards, grants and honorary degrees. He earned acclaim for his symphonies, choral music, and song cycles, but was also an avid creator of Home Brew works including a large body of work for wind band. The Appalachian Christmas Carols (After John Jacob Niles) take as their starting point folk carols collected, arranged and published by Niles in the 1930s. Rather than spinning out variations, Persichetti compresses and intensifies, as though making a dried fruit snack offering a few rich bites of flavor.

## NORMAN DELLO JOIO (1913–)

Born in New York City, Norman dello Joio is, like Persichetti, an Italian-American, a descendent of Italian church organists. He started piano at age 4 and eventually decided that his ambitions were grander than the ancestral model of settling into a solid church job. Once committed to composition he won an array of prizes which reached one peak with his 1957 Pulitzer Prize for *Meditations on Ecclesiastes* and a further climax with his 1965 Emmy award for the music to the television special "Scenes from the Louvre." Despite his high-profile accomplishments dello Joio did not stint on Home Brew endeavors. He conceived and for years served as Chairman of Policy for the Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Musical Education which placed young composers in high schools to write music for school ensembles, and his own musical publications include *The Developing Flutist*, *Five Lyric Pieces for the Young Organist*, and *The Family Album for piano four-hands*. These Christmas settings from 1962-1968 include three of his original compositions, "The Holy Infant's Lullaby," "A Christmas Carol," and "Bright Star (Light of the World)" as well as traditional favorites. His settings of "Silent Night" and "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" provide an instructive comparison to Townsend's versions of the same pieces.