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Commission for Original Classical Composition Based on Early Feminist Saint, Marjorie Merryman

Claremont, CA (June 2018)—For Scripps’ third National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Award in a row, Associate Professor of Music Anne Harley will serve as the artistic director for the commission of a musical composition that sets texts from the Acts of Paul and Thecla to an original score for a vocal and instrumental ensemble. Harley has led all three NEA grants.

Marjorie Merryman ’72 was commissioned by Harley to compose the original piece, which is set to premier at Scripps College in April, 2020. One of Scripps’ first composition majors, Merryman is internationally renowned as an American composer. She has been the recipient of numerous awards, including two prizes from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Merryman is on the faculty at the Manhattan School of Music, where she was formerly Provost and Senior Vice President.

This composition is the latest in a series of 17 song cycles produced under the artistic direction of Harley, whose recording label, Voices of the Pearl, commissions, performs and records musical works from composers across the globe, setting text by and about female esoterics from world traditions throughout history. Harley is a soprano vocalist internationally recognized as a specialist in contemporary classical music and extended voice techniques.

“[The project] focuses on lifting up the voices of actual women who were notable practitioners and leaders of esoteric spiritual practices, but whose voices have been subsumed by what has become a patriarchal tradition,” says Harley.

St. Thecla was an aristocratic woman who abandoned her worldly goods, eschewed marriage, performed miracles to escape death when tortured, and followed Paul in the first century CE. Arguably the earliest female teacher of Christianity, her story will be translated from the original Greek and Coptic for the composition.

“She is a very intriguing character, sometimes referred to as a ‘feminist’ saint,” says Merryman. “Her story, and the issues around its status in various traditions, raise interesting questions about acceptable roles for female figures within religious hierarchies. The ideas are certainly resonant in our time: notions of a woman’s identity played out in an atmosphere of gender-based constraints, sexual intimidation and even violence. It will be challenging and rewarding to find music that can convey some sense of the emotional and intellectual complexity of this character; I think Anne Harley’s great expressive range will be perfect for this [challenge].”

Scripps College was founded in 1926 by Ellen Browning Scripps, a pioneering philanthropist and influential figure in the worlds of education, publishing, and women’s rights. Today, Scripps is a nationally top-ranked liberal arts college and women’s college with approximately 980 students and is a member of The Claremont Colleges in Southern California. The mission of Scripps College is to educate women to develop their intellects and talents through active participation in a community of scholars, so that as graduates they may contribute to society through public and private lives of leadership, service, integrity, and creativity.