

# INTRODUCING VOX CORDA:

## A New Perspective on String Orchestra Performance

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

I'm writing to announce the development of a new string orchestra in the Twin Cities. *Vox Corda* (the voice of the string) is planning to perform its inaugural two concerts early in 2005. Unlike any other orchestra *Vox Corda* will not only prepare and present repertoire from the standard string orchestra canon, but will prepare and present concerts in partnership with string musicians of other cultures. Thus a concert focusing on the music of a certain culture will not only present the classical string orchestra interpretation of that culture, but will present the exact folk music and instruments that originally influenced the classical composer. Equally unique, each orchestra rehearsal will include a workshop with our guest artists, in order to give orchestra members a grounding in the musical world they represent. Our first concert will focus on Norwegian string music and will feature Norwegian hardanger fiddler Karen Torkelson Solgård, and our second concert will focus on American string music and will feature world champion autoharpist and mountain dulcimer player Karen Mueller.

The orchestra will be open to accomplished violin, viola, cello, and double bass players who are interested in playing string orchestra music at a high level and in a warm, nurturing community. Even more importantly *Vox Corda* is for string players who are interested in exploring string music and string instruments of different cultures, plus delving into how these alternative string music traditions helped define some of the classical music we know so well. We expect to have 3-4 Monday evening rehearsals to prepare for each concert, and expect rehearsals and performances to take place in the acoustically-friendly sanctuary of a church in Richfield.

You, as string teachers and orchestra directors, are the people who I believe

have the most to experience by performing in *Vox Corda*, because in addition to the pleasures and satisfaction of performing in a quality string orchestra, you will gain an uncommon degree of insight into the folk traditions that have influenced much classical orchestra music, and will gather teaching tools and an introduction to alternate string playing traditions to offer to your own students.

### Where did this idea come from?

Trained in violin, piano, and ultimately as an orchestra conductor, I always had a strong interest in what we sometimes call "outreach" work, presenting classical music in non-traditional venues for non-traditional audiences. Throughout my career I've created, performed with, and administered a variety of innovative community-based classical music performance and education programs. But it was as the artistic director for Young Audiences of Minnesota several years ago that I had the great fortune to meet and work with artists who worked in many different genres and cultures. The first time I met Karen Torkelson Solgård she asked, "Did you know that Edvard Grieg based his song *Morning Mood* [from his incidental music to *Peer Gynt*] on the drone strings of the hardanger fiddle?" I was flabbergasted. And yet I soon realized that this was simply an extension of what we all learned as music students — that to truly understand a piece of music one must learn about its historical and cultural context. Ultimately Karen performed a concert with my community orchestra (the 3M Club Symphony Orchestra), which was eye opening, educational, brought us a full house, and was appreciated by performers and audience alike. The cross-cultural concert the orchestra performed the next year featured autoharpist and mountain dulci-

mer player Karen Mueller, and explored American orchestral music through the lens of some of the Appalachian folk music that inspired it. (We are currently planning our third such concert, an exploration of Bulgarian folk music and the orchestra music it has influenced.)

At about the same time and in the same vein I worked in my capacity with Young Audiences with Cheryl Paschke from the Minneapolis Public Schools to bring several folk-based string teaching artists into several Minneapolis middle school orchestra programs to see what these classically-based orchestra teachers, students, and programs might have to learn from master folk string musicians. Again it was flabbergasting to see how the classical and folk string traditions complemented each other so beautifully: We learn classical music by reading, and we learn to play folk music by listening. We play classical music as it is written, while improvising is part of playing folk music. We primarily play melodies in classical string music, but to play folk music you have to understand and play along with harmonic progressions. If we want our students to learn formal analysis would playing folk music not be a great introduction with its clear, predictable forms?

Nobody expects classical string players to suddenly become experts in other genres of music, but we certainly are discovering how much there is to learn from string music of other traditions, and thus how helpful (and fun!) it would be to become familiar with these traditions via our skills as classical orchestra musicians. So I invite you to explore [www.voxcorda.org](http://www.voxcorda.org), and to consider performing in this new and unique ensemble.

For more information, contact Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes at [elizabeth@voxcorda.org](mailto:elizabeth@voxcorda.org). ♪