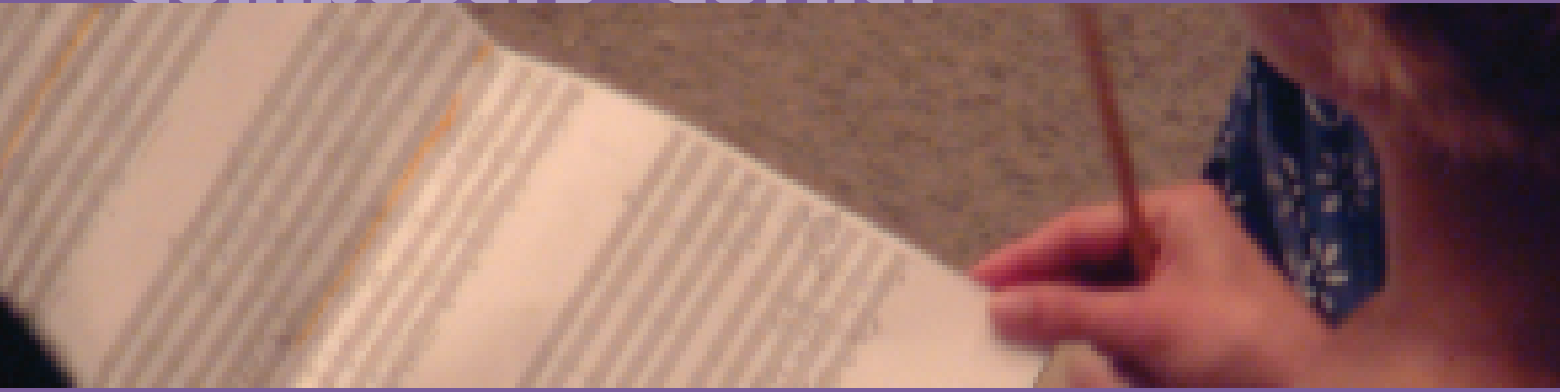


# Composers' Corner



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*An Interview with Composer Christopher Marshall*  
**Kathy Saltzman Romey**

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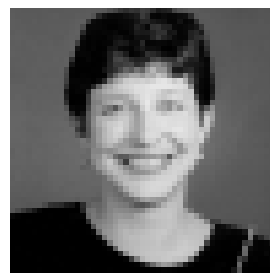
Please contact Kathy Saltzman Romey,  
Editor

Email: [romey001@umn.edu](mailto:romey001@umn.edu)

# Mi pa hae u trau.....I had a Dream

An Interview with Composer Christopher Marshall

Conducted by  
**Kathy Saltzman Romey**



October 20, 2006 – University of Minnesota

**Kathy Romey (KR):** Discuss your work as a composer. What generated such interest in the choral medium?

**Christopher Marshall (CM):** Choral music was one of my earliest influences - I was a chorister in an Anglican church choir from the age of five... More than half of my output is choral. Choral writing is where I honed most of my skills. There is something about writing for choirs – the kind of austerity of the four voices (or maybe a few more) – the limited range coupled with the emotional power the human voice has. To some extent, all instruments are emulating the voice and striving for that expressivity – that close connection between thought, spirit, and sound. Those are the things that appeal – they are also the challenge.

**KR:** What are some of your most significant choral works?

**CM:** My first was the song cycle, *To The Horizon*, which is a setting of twelve New Zealand poems. It still gets many performances... Recently, I completed the song cycle, *O Fragile Human* which was jointly commissioned by twenty-seven choirs, mainly in America but also in New Zealand and Austria. This is a very important work for me; spiritually, creatively and on a professional level... The Woodley Ensemble under Frank Albinder recently recorded it. It will be released on the Arsvis label – later this year I think.

*Minoi, Minoi* from my *Songs of Samoa* would have to take the prize for my most performed work. Last time I looked it had sold nearly seventy-thousand copies. People say this little song is my signature tune!

**KR:** Does the creative process change in setting vocal music versus instrumental music?

**CM:** It does change, but it is also different with each choral piece. Often it is the rhythm of the words, or the pitch suggested by the intonation of the text when you read it out loud. There is also the spirit of the words, the mood of the text. Sometimes just the concept of textures – almost a picture that the words paint in my mind. In that case it is a matter of fitting the text into the picture. Sometimes there is a formal challenge, like something canonic, where the text becomes part of the process, not the be-all and end-all.

**KR:** How would others describe your music?

**CM:** Romantic – dramatic – expressive – well-written for the voice... One of the most wonderful things that has happened in my career, especially over the last fifteen or so years [is] the shift away from a dry, self-consciously experimental approach to new music. It was prevalent in academic circles from the 1950s. My basic style, while it has broadened and deepened, has not changed at all. Because of this shift I now have the chance to communicate with audiences; my music is appreciated on its own terms, its own strengths and challenges...

I think we are in a golden age; these days we have a broader definition of what constitutes beauty and truth in music... So music becomes relevant for a wider section of the community and composers begin to regain their audiences... My music is Romantic, but I would hate us to be entering a new “Romantic Age”, where more academic or intricate or ‘edgy’ music is dismissed because it doesn’t communicate straightaway... That’s the main difference now from twenty, thirty years ago - a wide appreciation of many different styles. I hope it stays that way.

**KR:** Let’s discuss “U Trau” which the University of Minnesota Concert Choir and Symphonic Band just performed. This is a work for two bands and chorus. Tell us a little about the commission.

**CM:** In England there are two Americans, Dick and Georgia Bassett, who thirty years ago founded an organization, AMIS - The Association for Music in International Schools. Every year they have a series of events where students from international schools get together to form bands and choirs. They asked me to write a piece for one such event in Holland in 2004. It was to be the finale – the only piece where the band and the choir would combine. A huge choir – a huge band. But when you get bands and choirs together, especially with young performers, you run the risk of the band blasting the choir to pieces. To get around this I decided to split the band in two and put the choir in the middle, with the two bands taking turns in the limelight.

Secondly, I asked for guidance on the text; they said, “Anything secular, preferably with an international flavor.” A friend suggested, “Just choose an English text because English is the international language.” That got me thinking, “Who chose English as the international language?” I started looking at the alternatives – like Esperanto. Then I discovered there is a whole “constructed” and “auxiliary” language world out there – thousands of people with competing claims for the new “World Language”. None of the languages on offer captured my imagination so I started constructing my own, *Niuspi*. It uses the Indo-European language family as a basis because languages from that group - English, Spanish, Russian, Hindi etc - are spoken by more than half the world’s population. And *Niuspi* is an “isolating” language like the Chinese languages... Final consonants are

## ...Mi pa hae u trau.....I had a Dream

30

the bane of a singer's existence – so, no final consonants! And because the choir had to project above the bands Niuspi had to have plenty of vowels...

Over three months I constructed the language, wrote the text and set it to music, more or less simultaneously – quite a stressful process! But it all came together very well in Leiden, Holland under the same conductor, Jerry Luckhardt, who's just performed it here.

**KR:** *Would you discuss the construction and challenges of U Trau?*

**CM:** It is a kind of extendable chaconne, built on a five-note, chromatically descending bass, harmonized in two distinct ways... Every time the chaconne extends to a sixth, seventh or eighth note, you know something is going to happen, and these events are the pillars of the piece...

More than anything I have ever written I have a quite definite vision of how U Trau should be performed. This relates both to tempo and to the layout of the bands and choir.

**KR:** *So the chorus is placed in the middle of the two bands?*

**CM:** Yes. I was thrilled with the antiphonal aspects of this week's performance, to hear the melodies and the accompaniments passing and alternating – setting up this giant, sort of oscillating motion, which I had envisioned right from the start.

**KR:** *U Trau, Earthsong... What motivates or inspires you to compose such works?*

**CM:** With anything I write, the music comes first - the aim of producing something of beauty and power and integrity. Then communication through music; expressing yourself to others... As you point out, I do often use themes that are dear to my heart –

human and environmental issues. That's because they make it much easier for me to compose. The passion you feel for something is bound to come through in your music... If it encourages people to think about [these issues] then I am thrilled...



Many things inspire my music – beauty in nature – beauty or passion in poetry or the visual arts... Probably the prime motivation for composing anything is just that I have always needed to compose!

**KR:** *Do you have any words of advice for young composers?*

**CM:** Well, it's a cliché, but it's so important: know yourself, be true to yourself... Also, never choose composition as your main source of income unless you are really sure that is your vocation. My parents, when they discovered my career intentions, did their best to change my mind. Looking back, I am grateful they did that. They say to me now, "You have done well. If only we had

encouraged you more." But in fact they drew my attention to how difficult a career as a composer would be – at that age I needed an injection of realism! Unless you are really, really lucky there are not big audiences out there clamoring for your musical offerings. It's always a fight to be heard...

Now when people really do want to perform and listen to my music, it's so wonderful. If I had had it easy at the start, perhaps by now I would be taking this all for granted!

*Christopher Marshall is from Auckland in the North Island of New Zealand and currently serves as Composer in Residence at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. His music is notable for its lyricism, rhythmic ingenuity and structural integrity. Mr. Marshall has been the recipient of numerous international commissions, awards and fellowships, including a 1986 Fellowship in Composition from Trinity College, London (FTCL), a 1994 Mozart Fellowship at the University of Otago and 1996-1997 Fulbright Composer in Residence at the Eastman School of Music. For further information about his work and music, visit [www.vaiaata.com](http://www.vaiaata.com)*

*Kathy Saltzman Romey is Director of Choral Activities at the University of Minnesota and Artistic Director of the Minnesota Chorale. She also serves as the principal chorus master for the Oregon Bach Festival and is a strong advocate for the work of living composers. E-Mail: [romey001@umn.edu](mailto:romey001@umn.edu) ●*

