

# **The Winchester Widow**

**for Soprano and Piano, with optional Musical Saw and String Bass or  
Chamber Ensemble**

## **CHAMBER ENSEMBLE**

**Clarinet in Bb and A**

**Oboe**

**Musical Saw**

**Harp**

**String Bass**

**Percussion**

*The Winchester Widow* is based on the true story of Sara Winchester (1836-1922) whose husband, William, manufactured the rifle that came to bear their family name. The Winchester rifle, which was revolutionary in its ability to fire off many shots before needing to be reloaded, gave frontiersmen an unbeatable weapon against the Indians; so much so that the Winchester became known as "the gun that won the West." The rifle, though, was totally non-discriminatory, and thousands of Easterners also met their deaths as victims of this "repeating rifle." Sales of the firearm made the Winchesters fabulously wealthy. Sara's life seemed blessed when she gave birth to a child, Annie, in 1866. But from this moment a dark cloud of tragedy seemed to haunt Sara Winchester. Her daughter died at six months old, her husband died of tuberculosis, and Sara was gripped by the belief that the thousands of souls dispatched by her family's invention were intent on destroying her. On the advice of a spiritualist medium, Sara fled west to California to elude the pursuing ghosts of those her family's rifle had killed. In San Jose she bought a house and did as the medium told her she must do if she hoped to escape the wrath of all those murdered ghosts: she began to reconstruct the house. And every day she expanded, revised, reversed and extended the floor plans of the house so that the ghosts would become confused and trapped in the maze which she constructed as her mansion. Every night Sara sat in her séance room, conversing with the spirits who were so intent on harming her. And every morning she sketched new plans for new rooms, stairwells, floors and basements that her work crew then constructed. Over the course of 38 years Sara's architects worked 365 days a year, creating a seven storey labyrinth of uncounted numbers of rooms, all so that the Winchester widow could avoid her ghosts. The house still stands today, a monument to the human need to trick those prowling ghosts of our own mortality.

The ghost choruses in the opera are to be pre-recorded by the soprano who sings the role of Sara Winchester.

Composition of *The Winchester Widow* was begun at Hospitalfield House in Arbroath, Scotland, in September 2005 and was completed in State College, Pennsylvania, in December 2005. The composer is grateful to the Patrick Allan-Fraser of Hospitalfield Trust for his residency there.

*The Winchester Widow* was commissioned by Mary Kay McGarvey and is dedicated to her, through whose art are exorcised the darkest spirits of the fearful mind by the power of beauty and the excellence of music.

Approximate duration is 22 minutes.