



TANEYEV
Saint John of Damascus

SAINT-SAËNS
Messe de Requiem

BERKELEY COMMUNITY CHORUS & ORCHESTRA
MING LUKE, MUSIC DIRECTOR

GUSTAV MAHLER, *Adagietto* from Symphony No. 5

SERGEY TANEYEV, *St. John of Damascus*

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS, *Messe de Requiem*

Ming Luke, *Music Director*

Samantha Burgess, *Assistant Conductor*

Ellen Leslie, *soprano*

Sara Couden, *alto*

Brian Thorsett, *tenor*

Simon Barrad, *bass*

Friday, May 30, 2025, at 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, May 31, 2025, at 3:00 p.m.

Sunday, June 1, 2025, at 3:00 p.m.

Hertz Hall, University of California, Berkeley



WELCOME!

Welcome to our Spring 2025 concert series. This semester BCCO explores two brilliant but lesser-known works of compositional genius, Sergei Taneyev's *St. John of Damascus* and Camille Saint-Saëns' *Messe de Requiem*. Taneyev's *St. John of Damascus*, based on a poem of the same name by Alexander Tolstoy, is a powerful piece showcasing Taneyev's mastery of counterpoint. It was Taneyev's first published work and "immediately placed him in the upper echelons of composers during his day," says Maestro Ming Luke. Saint-Saëns, known chiefly for his orchestral works, wrote his expressive Requiem in 1875 to honor his great friend and benefactor, Albert Libon. According to Saint-Saëns' biographer, Jacques Bonnaure, "This unjustly neglected Requiem is perhaps the most sensitive, imaginative, and perfect work by the composer." Both works deserve to be better known, and BCCO feels honored to have the opportunity to perform them for you. We hope you enjoy the concert.

— Hester Bradbury & Ellen Rosenfield, *Co-Presidents*

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BCCO is supported in part by grants from the Alameda County ARTSFUND and the City of Berkeley CivicArts Grant Program.

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GUSTAV MAHLER
Adagietto from Symphony No. 5

SERGEI TANAYEV
St. John of Damascus

INTERMISSION

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS
Messe de Requiem

The concert will last approximately one hour and forty-five minutes, including one intermission.

Ming Luke, *Music Director*
Samantha Burgess, *Assistant Conductor*

Ellen Leslie, *soprano*

Sara Couden, *alto*

Brian Thorsett, *tenor*

Simon Barrad, *baritone*

MOVEMENTS

GUSTAV MAHLER
Adagietto from Symphony No. 5



SERGEI TANEEV
St. John of Damascus

Text by Aleksei Tolstoy

I. Adagio ma non troppo

<i>Idu v nevedomiy mne put',</i>	I begin a journey into the unknown,
<i>Idu mezh strakha i nadezhdi.</i>	I travel between fear and hope.
<i>Moy vzor ugas, ostila grud',</i>	My sight is extinguished, my breast has grown cold,
<i>Ne vnemlet slukh, somknuti vezhdi.</i>	I cannot hear, my eyes are closed.
<i>Lezhu bezglasen, nedvizhim,</i>	I am lying silent and still,
<i>Ne slishu bratskogo ridan'ya,</i>	I do not hear my brothers' sobbing,
<i>I ot kadila siniy dim,</i>	And the blue smoke of the incense
<i>Ne mne struit blagoukhan'ye.</i>	Does not exude its aroma for me.

II. Andante sostenuto

<i>No vechnim snom poka ya splyu,</i>	But while I sleep with the eternal sleep,
<i>Moya lyubov' ne umiraet.</i>	My love lives on.

*I yeyu, brat'ya, vas molyu,
Da kazhdïy k gospodu vziïvaet:
Gospod'! Gospod'! Gospod'! Gospod'!*

And I implore you, brothers,
Each one of you to call thus to the Lord:
Oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord!

III. Allegro

*V tot den', kogda truba
Vostrubit mira prestavlen'ya,
Primi usopshego raba
V tvoi nebesniye selen'ya.*

On the day when a trumpet
Shall signal the end of the world,
Accept thy departed servant
Into thy heavenly abode.



CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Messe de Requiem

Introit & Kyrie

Dies irae

Rex tremendae

Oro supplex

Hostias

Sanctus

Benedictus

Agnus Dei

THE ORCHESTRA

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Assistant Principal
Laura Rubinstein-Salzedo
Micha Okun

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Assistant Principal
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Joan Bajsarowicz
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Flavia Bellu
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Gretchen Carlson
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ARTISTIC STAFF



Ming Luke

Music Director

With “energy, creativity and charisma not seen since Leonard Bernstein,” and “vibrant,” “mind-blowing,” and “spectacular” conducting, BCCO Music Director Ming Luke is a versatile conductor who has excited audiences around the world. Highlights include conducting the Bolshoi Orchestra in Moscow and *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella* at the Kennedy Center, making his English debut at Sadler’s Wells with Birmingham Royal, conducting Dvořák’s *Requiem* in Dvořák Hall in Prague, recording the score for a Coppola film, and conducting over a hundred performances at the San Francisco War Memorial with the San Francisco Ballet. He has been recognized nationally for his work with music education and has designed and conducted education concerts and programs with Berkeley Symphony, Houston Symphony, Sacramento Philharmonic, and San Francisco Ballet, and he currently serves as music director of the Merced Symphony, principal conductor of the Nashville Ballet, associate conductor of the Berkeley Symphony, and principal guest conductor of the San Francisco Ballet. Allan Ulrich of the *San Francisco Chronicle* said, “Ming Luke delivered the best live theater performance I’ve ever heard of [Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*],” and BCCO’s *War Requiem* was named the best choral performance of 2016 in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Passionate about collaboration with dance companies and deepening the impact of movement to live music, Ming has guested with Boston Ballet, New York City Ballet Orchestra, Nashville Symphony/Ballet, San Diego Ballet, and others, and conducted Orchestre Prométhée in Paris as part of San Francisco’s residency with Les Étés de la Danse. Famed dancer Natalia Makarova stated, “Ming has a mixture of pure musicality and a sensitivity to needs of the dancers, which are such rare qualities.”

Ming has written, arranged, and performed over 150 education concerts with the Berkeley Symphony and has served on grant panels for the National Endowment of the Arts and the Grants and Cultural Committee of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission. An exciting pops conductor, he has created and conducted pops concerts in many venues, from baseball stadiums to picnics with over 4,000 people in attendance, traditional concert halls, and recordings for Major League Baseball.

Ming holds a master of fine arts degree in conducting from Carnegie Mellon University and a bachelor of music degree in music education and piano pedagogy from Westminster Choir College of Rider University.

ARTISTIC STAFF



Samantha Burgess

Assistant Conductor

Conductor Samantha Burgess currently serves as the assistant conductor of the Berkeley Community Chorus and Orchestra in Berkeley, CA. Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, she also regularly cover conducts for the Berkeley Symphony with Music Director Joseph Young, and serves as interim music director with the Community Women's Orchestra in Oakland, CA. She has previously held the position of assistant conductor with the Westerville Symphony (OH), the Galesburg Community Choir (IL), the Oxford University Philharmonia (UK), and the Knox College String Ensemble (IL).

Samantha holds master's degrees in both orchestral conducting and music theory from The Ohio State University, where she was the music director of the Ohio State Community Orchestra and served as an assistant conductor for the Ohio State Symphony Orchestra. While at Ohio State, she was also a graduate teaching assistant in music theory and a member of the Cognitive and Systematic Musicology Laboratory.

On the podium, Samantha combines conducting and her background in music theory research to develop innovative, multimedia performances. Through her study of the performance of musical form and emotional responses to music, particularly as they pertain to the relationships between the conductor, audience, and performers, she has created immersive lighting designs to showcase musical structure for the audience during a performance. Her research has been accepted for presentation at the Society for Music Theory Midwest Conference, Future Directions of Music Cognition, and the Oxford Conducting Institute International Conducting Studies Conference.

Samantha has conducted in masterclasses and competitions both in the USA and abroad, most recently in July 2022, where she finished as a semi-finalist in the International Academy and Competition for Orchestral Conducting with the Chamber Orchestra of Cascais and Oerai. She has also participated in the New York Conducting Workshop, the London Conducting Workshop, and the George Hurst Conductor's Course at the Sherborne Summer School of Music.



Jesse Micek

Accompanist

Jesse Micek has been working as a piano accompanist in the Bay Area for over twenty years. He received his bachelor of arts degree in classical piano performance from Cal State East Bay and is an alum of the Chabot College music department, where he is on faculty as collaborative pianist. He is the principal accompanist for the Danville Girls Chorus and past accompanist with the San Francisco Girls Chorus. Jesse works regularly as a pianist for festivals of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS). Besides his work as a performer, he operates a piano teaching studio at his

home in Castro Valley. He is a former president of the Southern Alameda County Branch of the Music Teachers Association of California (MTAC).

GUEST ARTISTS



Ellen Leslie

soprano

Four-time winner of the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition in the San Francisco District, soprano Ellen Leslie enjoys an international career as a versatile opera performer, concert soloist, and recitalist. She has appeared on stages in Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, France, England, Germany, and the United States in roles including Pamina (*Die Zauberflöte*), Adina (*Elixir of Love*), Valencienne (*The Merry Widow*), Josephine (*HMS Pinafore*), the title role in *Patience*, Jane Bennet in the world premiere of Kirke Mechem's *Pride & Prejudice*, and the soprano solos in the Requiems of Mozart, Fauré, Michael Haydn, Bruckner, and Brahms; *Elijah*; *St John Passion*; Mozart's *Mass in C minor*; and *Carmina Burana*. Ellen has enjoyed multiple solo appearances with the San Francisco Symphony and was nominated for a 2024 Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance with an SFS chamber ensemble. An avid champion of new music, she is a frequent collaborator with contemporary composers including David Conte, Ian Venables, Byron Adams, and Eric Choate. Born in San Francisco and raised on an Irwin 37 sailboat in Sausalito, Ellen circumnavigated the globe with her family before studying at the University of Denver, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and Hochschule für Musik Leipzig. (www.ellenlesliesoprano.com)



Sara Couden

alto

Praised by *Opera News* for her “unusually rich and resonant” voice, contralto Sara Couden is a premiere interpreter of operatic, chamber, and song repertoire. Her latest triumphs include a role debut as Nurse in Dukas's rarely performed masterwork *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* with West Edge Opera, as well as company debuts with the Philadelphia Orchestra as Mother/Chinese Cup/Dragon Fly in Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra as the alto soloist in Julia Perry's *Stabat Mater*, and with the Charleston Symphony in Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Sara also recorded her debut solo album, the complete vocal works of Artur Schnabel, on the Steinway & Sons label. Her 2022–23 season included a return to the Metropolitan Opera to cover Mrs. Sedley in Britten's *Peter Grimes* and company premieres with the Seattle Symphony in Handel's *Messiah*, the California Symphony in songs by Mahler, and the Eureka Symphony in Mozart's *Requiem*.

Sara is a graduate of the Lindemann Young Artist Program at the Metropolitan Opera and an alumna of the Marlboro Music Festival, Music@Menlo, Music Academy of the West, and the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices. She holds a master of music degree with honors in opera from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and an artist diploma in early music, chamber music, and oratorio from the Yale School of Music and Institute of Sacred Music.



Brian Thorsett

tenor

Hailed as “a strikingly gifted tenor, with a deeply moving, unblemished voice” (sfmusicjournal.com), Brian Thorsett excels in opera, oratorio, and recital across the world. He has been seen and heard in over 100 diverse operatic roles, ranging from Monteverdi to Britten and to works composed specifically for his talents.

GUEST ARTISTS

As a concert singer, Brian fosters a stylistically diversified repertoire of over 250 works. Future engagements include Evangelist and soloist in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, *St. John Passion*, *Mass in B minor*, and several cantatas; Handel's *Messiah*; the Requiems of Mozart and Verdi; Haydn's *Creation*; Bruckner's *Te Deum*; Pärt's *Passio*; and the world premiere of Serj Tankian's *Invocations*.

Closely associated with expanding the vocal-chamber genre, he has been involved in premieres and commissions of Ian Venables, Peter Josheff, David Conte, Shinji Eshima, Scott Gendel, Gordon Getty, Michel Bosc, Noah Luna, Laurence Lowe, Brian Holmes, Eric Choate, Eric Davis, Michael Scherperel, Robert Conrad, and Nicholas Carlozzi. He also makes many concert appearances with SF Opera & Ballet Principal Horn Kevin Rivard. Their interpretations of Britten's *Serenade and Canticle III* have been called "impressive, captivating, transporting" (repeatperformances.org), "arresting, fervent and eerie" (nffo.org), and "so striking [they] managed to efface the original recording" (sfciviccenter.blogspot.org). Future concerts will premiere *Bourne to Shelley* (Eshima), *The Jolly Hunter* (Holmes), and *Perceval* (Bosc).

Brian's voice has been featured in films and commercials as the artist for Soundiron studio's *Voice of Rapture: The Tenor*. Brian has released the albums *Everyone Sang: Vocal Music of David Conte*; *Nature, Love, and Death*, a collection of American song cycles; *Rapture and Regret*, featuring song cycles of Daron Hagen; and *October Skies*, featuring chamber music for tenor. He is currently associate professor at the School of Performing Arts at Virginia Tech. (www.brianthorsett.com)



Simon Barrad

bass

Grammy-nominated baritone Simon Barrad is known for his versatile performances across the United States and Europe. His innovative programming style blends classical, jazz, folk, and new music. He has performed at prestigious venues including the Metropolitan Opera, Wigmore Hall, the Columbus Symphony, Cincinnati Opera, the Ravinia Festival, Stanford Live, the Marlboro Music Festival, the Berlin Philharmonie, and Finland's National Opera House, where he studied as a 2015–16 Fulbright scholar. As a performer and former mentor

with ArtSmart, which provides free music and singing lessons to teenagers in underserved communities, he strives to build empathy and understanding through music.

A four-time *Downbeat* magazine national award winner for vocal jazz, Simon has performed at the Monterey Jazz Festival and the Grammys with the Grammy vocal jazz ensemble. He regularly performs with Austin-based Conspire and was the baritone soloist for their national tour of *Considering Matthew Shepard*.

Simon champions new works, premiering compositions by John Harbison, David Lang, Craig Hella, Mason Bates, and others. As a Jewish musician, he served as High Holiday soloist at Cincinnati's Plum Street Temple and currently performs at San Francisco's Congregation Sherith Israel. He recently founded JIVE: Jewish Innovative Voices & Experiences with Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen and Ronny Michael Greenberg.

Simon holds a master's degree from the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music and a bachelor's degree in voice with a French language minor from California State University, Long Beach, where he graduated *summa cum laude*. Simon has collaborated with renowned artists, including Mitsuko Uchida, Jonathan Biss, Awadagin Pratt, and Ignat Solzhenitsyn.

PROGRAM NOTES

SERGEI TANEEV, 1856–1915

St. John of Damascus (Op. 1)

I go on a path unknown to me.

So begins the cantata Sergei Taneyev—a well-known pianist who, at 28, had already written some 60 works—esteemed with the distinction of opus 1. The public warmly received Taneyev’s introduction. Yet, as far as we know, this weekend’s concert series is only the second time this 1884 cantata has been performed on the West Coast. Why is Taneyev’s early masterwork—and indeed, his work as a whole—now little known?

Perhaps because of competing attention. Among so many accomplished Russian composers, Taneyev has been overshadowed by his contemporaries, including his teacher, Tchaikovsky. Or perhaps because of his difficult-to-classify position in Russian choral music. No other composer combined the chants and haunting melodies of the Orthodox choral tradition with such intense and finely wrought counterpoint—the reward of extensive study of the Baroque masters.

Scholarship was central to Taneyev’s life. After graduating from the Moscow Conservatory, he succeeded Tchaikovsky as the master of composition and harmony and later became its director. His list of students reads like a who’s who of Russian music at the time: Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, Khachaturian, Kabalevsky, and Scriabin. Taneyev steered them all, applying the same scrutiny to his own compositions. He was relentlessly self-critical and tirelessly edited his work—which some scholars have criticized as bloodless.

We don’t agree, listening to the rich and sumptuous score that is *St. John of Damascus*. An atheist, Taneyev was nevertheless drawn to Aleksei Tolstoy’s poem about the Byzantine saint who, like the composer, was a scholar. The music, though—which Taneyev wrote for the funeral of his piano teacher, Nikolai Rubenstein—speaks directly to the heart.

In darkly hued timbres the orchestra introduces the solemn chorale phrase—adapted from the ancient Orthodox chant *So svyatimi Upokoy* (Rest with the Holy Ones)—that forms the piece’s emotional core. The choir then joins with a new fugal subject, one yearning and urgent. Pulsing string

textures mimic the contours of chant before the two themes at last combine in a richly woven tapestry of sound.

“My love lives on,” the unaccompanied choir sings in the tender and soothing second movement. Then comes one of the most dramatic passages in the piece, a rousing call to action set above thundering tremolo. “And I implore you, brothers, each one of you to call thus to the Lord!” In an instant we’re upon the final fugue. Taneyev hits all the marks—finely developed bass lines, imaginative episodes, thrilling *stretto*—in this pinnacle of contrapuntal writing. But at the last minute this grand music pulls back. The chorale returns in a simple setting—one of utmost beauty. As the departed servant ascends to his heavenly dwellings, our musical journey concludes.

About a decade after *St. John of Damascus*, Taneyev’s time at the Moscow Conservatory came to an end. When students joined in the 1905 Revolution’s mass protests against the brutal rule of Tsar Nicholas II, they were expelled by the school’s administration. Taneyev—reportedly a supporter of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks—resigned in protest. He then collaborated to establish a “People’s Conservatory” in the workers’ districts of Moscow, where all were invited to join with professional musicians in studying the masterworks.

His reduced teaching load allowed him to redouble his efforts at composing. He completed nine string quartets, four symphonies, a piano concerto, and many other instrumental and vocal compositions, including an opera, *Oresteia*, which he considered his crowning achievement.

After attending the funeral, in 1915, of his former student Scriabin, Taneyev contracted pneumonia. He died shortly thereafter, and only recently has his musical legacy finally begun to gain wider recognition. But *St. John of Damascus* alone is ample proof that this recognition is richly deserved. For the BCCO singers and instrumentalists, it has been a joy to discover. We hope that you’ll find the work as illuminating as we do.

— Rebecca Wishnia, *second violin*,
and Jerry Freiwirth, *BCCO bass*

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS, 1835–1921

Messe de Requiem (Op. 54)

The Requiem by Camille Saint-Saëns was first performed in 1878, and we are lucky to hear it today because it is one of his most lucid and lovely works. We are doubly lucky because the music of Saint-Saëns is not so frequently heard today. The reason may be that it was caught between two huge musical waves. The first wave broke when Saint-Saëns was young. It was the overpowering “modern music” of the great romantic Robert Schumann (1810–56) and, of course, the amazingly innovative Richard Wagner (1813–83). Saint-Saëns loved these composers. But when he was older, a huge wave of imaginative, groundbreaking, “modern” French music broke in the early twentieth century. The rising stars were Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky (who lived in France). Saint-Saëns definitely did not love this music.

Nonetheless, who can forget the artistry of Saint-Saëns in the luscious melody of Delilah’s song of seduction (“Mon coeur s’ouvre à ta voix”) in his opera *Samson and Delilah*? If you go online, you can hear Maria Callas or Jesse Norman singing this aria. This artistry appears over and over in today’s Requiem, even though the tone is more somber.

The Requiem may owe its beauty to the fact that it was the marker of a life-changing event for Saint-Saëns. Here is the backstory. Albert Libon, the postmaster general of Paris, was a friend and patron of Saint-Saëns. When Libon died, he left Saint-Saëns 100,000 francs (over \$500,000 in today’s money). At one stroke, Saint-Saëns became financially independent. People say that there was a legal string attached to the bequest, as in, “Write my Requiem or no money.” But it’s likely that before Libon’s death, this string had been cut. (Let’s leave the issue to people who have actually read the will.) In any event, Saint-Saëns must have felt an intense moral obligation, because he went to Switzerland and composed the Requiem in eight days. Maybe the speed of composition speaks to how much Saint-Saëns esteemed Libon and was grateful to him. Also, the speed perhaps accounts for the music’s unfiltered and deep emotional core.

Movement 1, *Introit & Kyrie*, begins with the combined hymn for eternal rest (*requiem aeternam*) and plea for God’s mercy (*Kyrie eleison*). Listen for how the hymns and the

soloists and the chorus often blend together into one texture. The second through fourth movements comprise a very melodic version of a requiem’s traditional *Dies irae* hymn. This ancient hymn is very theatrical, and Saint-Saëns seems to heighten the theatricality by organizing the movements in such a way that it seems that you (yes, you!) are standing in line awaiting your turn to come to judgment. Movement 2, *Dies irae*, looks anxiously to the future Day of Judgment, which arrives when the trumpets of the Last Day sound (*tuba mirum*). Here, you will notice that Richard Strauss is not the first person to use the chord progression that starts 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Movement 3, *Rex tremendae*, is a quick, driving heartbeat pulse that seems to imply “I’m next in line!!” In movement 4, *Oro supplex*, you are at the Throne making your pitiful pleas.

The *Dies irae* by Saint-Saëns is really one of the most human versions of the hymn. In contrast to its excitement, *Hostias* (movement 5) is a calm and beautiful chorale that marks the liturgical half-point of the Mass. Saint-Saëns wanted the short *Sanctus* (movement 6) to be majestic (*maestoso*), and it became a chorus with some of the majestic qualities of Handel. In the *Benedictus* (movement 7), the soloists and chorus once more blend in a delicate fabric as in the *Introit & Kyrie* of movement 1. The Requiem closes with *Agnus Dei* (movement 8), which is introduced by the orchestral opening of movement 1. It then moves into an almost operatic melody, first with the soloists and then with the chorus. It ends with a confident plea: “Let perpetual light shine upon them eternally with your saints—because you are good.”

Indeed, Saint-Saëns gave M. Libon a beautiful farewell.

— Lawrence DiCostanzo, *BCCO* bass



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BCCO's Legacy Society comprises individuals who have included BCCO in their estate plans. The Society is named in memory and recognition of Betty Pigford, a supremely capable and charming member of the chorus and its board of directors for many years, who helped shape many of BCCO's most important initiatives. We would be pleased to include you among the group of individuals who, as members of the Legacy Society, are sustaining BCCO for future generations. For more information, please email development@bcco.org.

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