

THE HITCHCOCK INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN AMERICAN MUSIC

presents, in collaboration with the Brooklyn College Composer's Forum,
the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities,
and the Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn College:

MUSIC IN POLYCULTURAL AMERICA

spring 2021 virtual speaker series

"I did not intend to set up as a poet": Helen Keller's "A Chant of Darkness"

Stefan Sunandan Honisch

"In 'The Chant of Darkness' I did not intend to set up as a poet." Helen Keller's modest words obscure the ambition and scope of the lyrical text with which she concludes her 1908 book *The World I Live In*. This talk, connected to Honisch's postdoctoral research, examines Keller's poem alongside two of its musical settings. The first, an Italian translation by Cesare Sodero, received its first performance at BAM in 1919. The second, by Philip Greeley Clapp, was first performed in 1935 at the State University of Iowa. Clapp played his setting for Keller in 1929 and, later, he wrote her a letter attributing the composition's extended genesis "to the beauty, power, and eloquence" of her poetic utterance. Through a close reading of Helen Keller's "A Chant of Darkness" and its musical incarnations, Honisch argues that these chants resound across the "vast, unanswering dark" in a multi-voiced dialogue with "The Book of Job" that Keller envisions as a place of both origin and return.



Stefan Sunandan Honisch is a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of British Columbia. His postdoctoral research explores the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Helen Keller's musical life, documented in Keller's own writings, and in contemporaneous newspaper, magazines, photographs, and films.

TUESDAY, 9 MARCH, 12:30PM

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