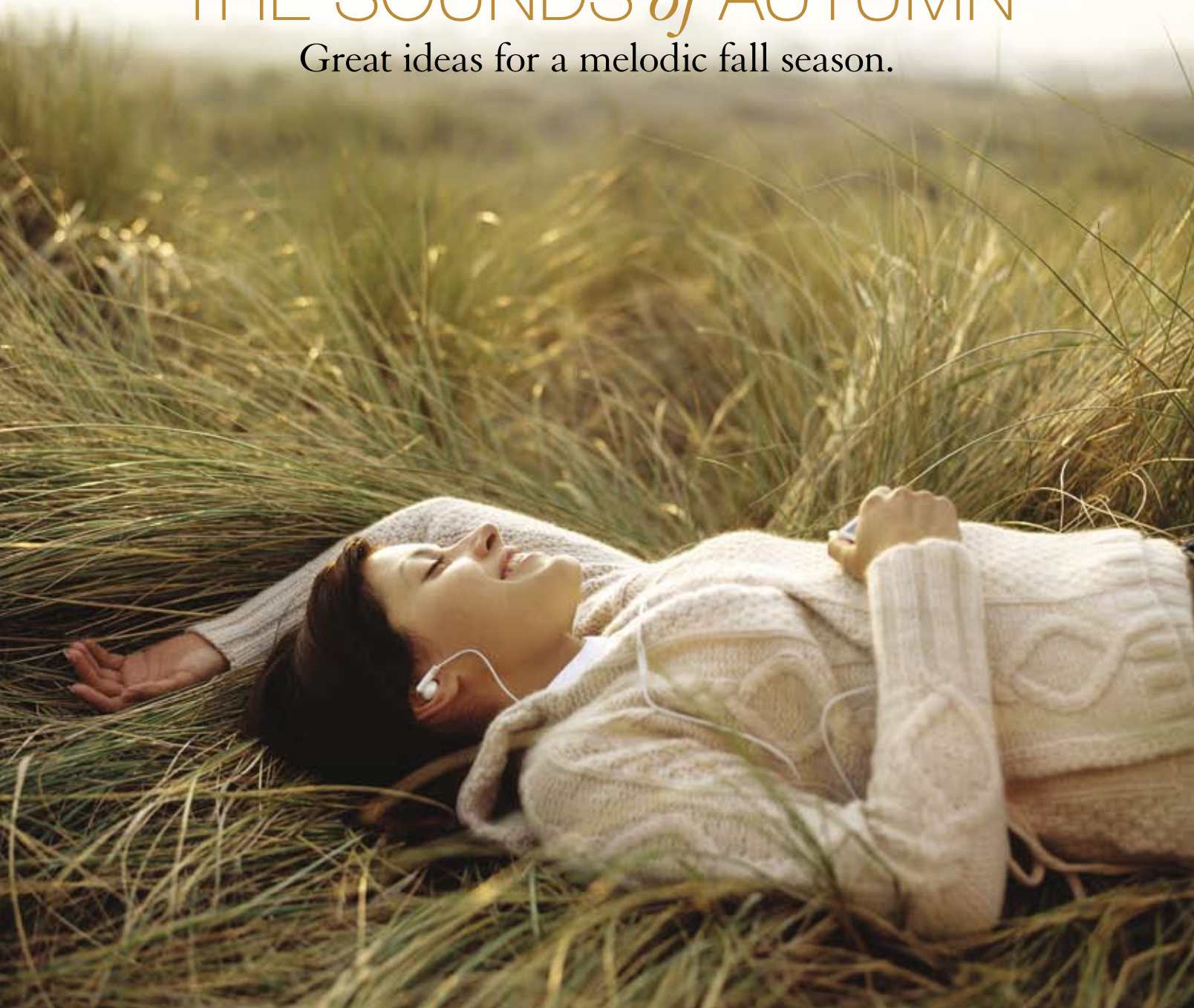


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OCTOBER 2009

THE SOUNDS *of* AUTUMN

Great ideas for a melodic fall season.



LIFE ON A HIGH NOTE

Conductor Lesley Leighton guides and inspires the Los Robles Master Chorale.



LESLEY LEIGHTON RETURNED TO HER NEW YORK APARTMENT IN THE FALL OF 2001 FROM YET ANOTHER STINT ABROAD.

Weary of her nomadic lifestyle as a professional opera singer, she decided to quit singing. By then she'd racked up an impressive resume as a conductor, chorister, and soloist at major opera houses in Los Angeles, New York City, and Paris.

Although she had no blueprint for her immediate future, Leighton wasn't concerned. "I pretty much make my own path, and I tend to take personal risks," says the accomplished musician.

With time on her hands, Leighton volunteered for Michael Bloomberg's New York City mayoral campaign and was invited to join his staff the day after his election. Her duties included speech writing and she says, "To be a good speechwriter, you have to understand a person's way of speaking: his cadence, rhythms, and idioms. Luckily, I've always had a good ear."

Her ear is what set Leighton on a musical path, and which would eventually lead her to the West Coast, where today she is artistic director of Ventura County's Los Robles Master Chorale (LRMC). It was a circular path.

Born and raised in Los Angeles (Westchester), Leighton says her mother signed her up for piano lessons when she was 7 years old. "I wasn't actually practicing or learning the notes," she says. "I did

a lot of things by ear, and I'd ask my teacher: 'Would you play it for me?' Of course, she soon caught on, and told my mom to consider giving me voice lessons."

Leighton was also exposed to outstanding music programs and dedicated teachers who produced fabulous children's choirs: "Southern California has one of the richest choral music traditions. Several of us who sang together in youth choirs went on to sing and study music at Loyola Marymount University under Paul Salamunovich, who treated and trained us as professionals."

Salamunovich, an internationally acclaimed choral conductor, urged Leighton to pursue a professional singing career. "I realize now that I've been trained and groomed my entire life by incredible mentors," says Leighton. That includes Bloomberg, whom she credits for her business skills. She cherishes the two-year period she worked for the man she fondly calls "Super Mike," but she ultimately missed music.

In 2004, Leighton returned to California and earned a DMA (doctorate of musical arts) in choral music from USC's Thornton School of Music. She also joined the prestigious Los Angeles Master Chorale, a world-renowned chorus that

Lesley Leighton

In addition to live performances, Leighton has recorded more than 35 soundtracks, both as a soloist (*Mars Attacks*, *Heaven or Vegas*) and also in the chorus with many of her colleagues. Her most recent soundtracks include *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* and the upcoming release *2012*. For more information visit www.lesleyleighton.org.

Los Robles Master Chorale

Los Robles Master Chorale is an 85-voice choral ensemble serving Ventura and western Los Angeles counties. The 2009-2010 season will feature six concerts. Most performances will be held at the Church of the Epiphany, 5450 Churchwood Drive, Oak Park. For more information visit www.lostroblesmasterchorale.org.

UPCOMING CONCERTS INCLUDE:
Echoes: Saturday, November 14 at 8 p.m.
Holiday Presence: Thursday, December 10 and Saturday, December 12 at 8 p.m.

performs at Walt Disney Concert Hall; and last year, threw her hat in the ring to be LRMC's artistic director. James Stemen, LRMC founding director and a former music professor at Moorpark College who guided the chorale for 30 years, had recently retired.

"Lesley's worked with the biggest composers in the world, so we knew she was talented," says president of LRMC's board of directors Robert Weibezahl about Leighton's audition, "but in just 20 minutes, she turned the chorus sound around."

Leighton smiles slyly at this account. "I selected a piece of music that most people would never try. A choir has to function as a team, and my object is to make a beautiful blended sound. I demonstrated the sound I wanted for each section of the chorus." (Leighton also directs the Oriana Women's Choir at USC.)

Since Leighton's appointment in June 2008, Weibezahl says, "Our chorus has undergone an amazing transformation. She has a vision and knows how to implement it."

Within a year, Leighton grew the chorus from 37 singers to 85, increased the number of annual concerts from two to six, and directed the chorale (along with other choirs) at the Hollywood Bowl Easter Sunrise Service. She also obtained the rights for LRMC to acquire the choral library of the Master Chorale of Washington (D.C.), which contains more than 1,000 choral selections, as well as many orchestral parts and scores of major works. Since then, she has gone through every single piece of music; much of it will be featured in future LRMC concerts.

"My vision is to provide Ventura County with the same kind of music experience patrons can get at Disney Hall. It's a high bar but I tend to set those," says Leighton.

"She expects excellence and knows how to get it," adds Lynn Youngren, a 17-year LRMC chorus member. "Our rehearsals are all business under Leighton's direction, but she inspires us beyond our wildest imaginations."

The chorus sings both large choral works, such as Mozart's "Requiem" and Morten Lauridsen's "Nocturnes," as well as smaller compositions like "Natufurahi Siku Ya Leo" by African composer Boniface Mganga. Leighton selects members via audition, who range in age from 17 to 78 years. "I value my older singers, plus my kids are so engaged. They're fresh and available."

Education is the key to enjoying a classical music concert, believes Leighton. "We strive to educate audiences about the music they're going to hear through pre-concert conversations with conductors, composers, and artists. I want our performances to be accessible for everyone, no matter the level of understanding. We're neither too stodgy, nor too edgy. And of course, there's no right or wrong way to listen!"

Determined to help create the next generation of choral singers and patrons, Leighton is in the process of developing an LRMC outreach program with local schools. Next March, her group will host its first high school and college choral festival, and will also jointly perform a special concert with Los Robles Children's Choir.

"I want to excite kids about music and keep them singing. I want them to know careers in music are possible. Everything I do comes back to that," says Leighton. "I couldn't love what I do more. I'm right where I'm supposed to be." ■

Feed the Soul



Discover the wall hangings of Artist Teena Leonardi's watercolor-on-silk creations (above) currently featured in our showroom. Meet the artist at our Trunk Show, October 24, 10-5, and enjoy appetizers and martinis.

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