



# KOCHO

A new opera by Garrett Fisher | movement Christy Fisher | masks Louise McCagg



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# 1 About *Kocho*

*Kocho* is based on the Noh play of the same name, and tells the story of a wandering Priest who meets a butterfly and “liberates” it by letting it dance. As with most Noh plays, the plot is bare-bones, allowing other elements – the poetry, the rhythms, the music – to breathe freely. We, as an audience, are not bound by the details of the narrative – instead, like the butterfly, we are liberated and allowed to dance in a universe of site and sound.

*Kocho* is intended to be a site-specific piece, which invites the audience to travel and, like the butterfly in the opera, “ascend.” As I began to structure the piece, I considered the practicalities of performing in a museum, and how we, the ensemble, would fully engage a group of people who might themselves be in different locations. Below is a visual narrative of how the Fisher Ensemble would do exactly that.

## 2 Visual Narrative

NOTE: I’m imagining that a performance would begin at 8 pm and last 1 hour and 10 minutes.

### 7:30 pm: Station 1, a cryptlike space

As the audience enters, they are led to the **Station 1: a cryptlike resting place**. While we hear live gongs from performer Dean Moore, we walk amongst an installation of small headpieces by Louise McCagg, which are mounted on bronze grids and lit to evoke eerie deathmasks. In addition, choreographer and dancer Christy Fisher, moves among the audience, gongs, and artwork. At this point she is the dancer-butterfly, as well as a silent narrator, linking us to our ancestors and past. We, like the butterfly, are in a state of pre-life limbo, not yet liberated. We are yet to be born.

### 8 pm: Station 2, a larger, open space

The audience hears the sound of flute – perhaps from the base of a staircase or entrance. (Because the audience might be milling through various parts of the museum, this could be heard throughout). The flutist Margaret Lancaster (see bio) plays the “Kocho flute raga,” and invites the audience up the stairs into the main space – **Station 2: a larger, open space**.

The first section of the opera would occur on this Station. This space would also allow a majority of the audience to actually see this section.

### 8:10 pm

As we hear an opening processional, the “Priest” slowly enters, walking through the crowd, if necessary, to reach the spot at the base of the stairs. The audience has a choice: they can either experience the music and poetry of the piece without necessarily knowing “what’s going on,” or with the aid of program notes, they learn that the Priest has traveled to the Capital to see the trees bloom.

### 8:10-8:20 pm

During this first section, the “butterfly” – a character that is performed by 3 people: vocalist, flutist (Margaret) and dancer (Christy) - enters and interacts with the Priest. Through a flute solo, as well as a Priest Aria we learn the butterfly has yearned to dance with the plum blossom, but has not been able to, since the plum tree blooms before the butterfly is born. Through musical dialogue, movement, and duet, the relationship between the Priest and butterfly is formed.

The butterfly begins to ascend the staircase; it will “describe” its plight through dance and song. The audience follows up the steps, and will be led to 5 Stations.

### 8:20-8:50 pm: **The Plight Stations: 3a-3e**

Various performers – gongs, harmonium, vocalists – have already been stationed at 5 various locations on all floors. As the audience climbs the stairs and enters the second floor, all performers *simultaneously* begin to perform their specific “Kocho plight”.

NOTE: These Plight Stations are within “hearing” distance of one another, but far enough apart so that the audience has a chance to move from one location to another.

I’m imagining 5 Plights, one for each sense: *sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell*. Each plight would be performed by a single performer and would consist of a combination of either a song, dance, or instrumental performance. These Plights would be created in relationship to specific pieces of art that are on display in the museum.

While each Plight was performed independently of the others, potentially on separate floors, I would create them so that their sounds could spill over into other locations and would all go together, creating both interesting consonances and dissonances. Thus, no matter where you were in the museum, you would potentially not only hear the “plight” in front of you, but, simultaneously, the other plights as well. The effect of this would be to surround the audience in a 3-d soundscape, and would encourage the audience to visit all the “plight stations.”

Each performer would auto-loop their individual performance for half an hour, allowing the audience to visit each floor and experience each “plight.”

8:50 pm

From another floor (perhaps a stairwell), we hear the long tones of a trombone calling, echoing throughout the museum. This signals the other performers to stop what they are doing and move toward the staircase where they can look down at the trombone.

8:55 pm: Station 4, a final gathering place

From **Station 4: a final gathering place**, the Priest sings down, answering the trombone. She has heard the Plights and now wishes to liberate the Butterfly. Her clear, clarion voice resonates throughout the space.

9:00 pm

As the Priest begins to sing a prayer of liberation, the entire ensemble – stationed at various points near Station 4, maybe surrounding the audience, begins to intone a harmony (whether sung or performed), filling the entire museum with a harmonious chord, grounded by the reedy sound of the Indian harmonium (played by myself). The soprano hits high, pure tones over this chord, unlocking us with its singularity.

As the Priest completes the prayer, the ensemble – on all levels – begins to sing and perform a musical canon, while the dancer (as the butterfly) slowly ascends the staircase. Whether or not we see the performers, we hear the canon build in dynamic range and pitch range, growing larger and fuller, as the dancer reaches the top floor, passes by the Priest, and disappears.

The ensemble completes the canon with a single chord – containing both major (consonant) 3rds and minor (dissonant) 3rds. Is it happy or sad? The ambiguous chord reverberates into silence: the butterfly has been liberated; the evening is complete.

### 3 About Garrett Fisher

"Mythology, conflict and transformation are recurring elements in the distinctive body of work the Seattle composer Garrett Fisher. In a series of theatrical works based on subjects from history and myth, Mr. Fisher has combined elements of opera, dance, Indian raga, Japanese Noh theater and more into fusions that have both a ritualistic intensity and an improvisatory freedom...a groundbreaking hybrid...a strong, unified and strikingly individual utterance of unambiguous beauty." -*The New York Times*

Considered by *The New Yorker* to be a "a star of Seattle's new music scene who has been deeply influenced by Japanese Noh theater and Chinese opera," Garrett studied at Oberlin College and Conservatory. During his childhood his family lived in such locations as Istanbul, London, and Paris. His interest in music of other cultures led to his study of the tabla and classical Indian singing. As part of the

Fisher Ensemble in Seattle, he has created and performed his original operas at On the Boards, Consolidated Works, the Nippon Kan Theater, as well as in New York at HERE Arts Center and Judson Memorial Church. He has received support from 4culture, the Allied Arts Foundation, the ASCAP Foundation/Morton Gould Young Composer Award, Bossack Heilbron Foundation, Centrum Arts Colony, City Artists, Meet the Composer, the King County Arts Commission, Puffin Foundation, the Seattle Arts Commission and the Wiggly World Foundation. Recordings of his pieces can be found on 16 Visions Records and BIS, which featured his recording *The Passion of Saint Thomas More* as part of its 30 year/30 CD commemorative edition.

As with Noh theater and Chinese opera, which have play genres such as Warrior play or God play, Mr. Fisher has discovered his own categories and traditions. With *The Passion of Saint Thomas More* (1997), and *The Passion of Saint Sebastian* (2009), he draws upon the medieval passion play form (“touches of pure dramatic genius” – *Gramophone*); *Moon in the Bucket* (1998) and *At the Hawk’s Well* (2010) are inspired by the Noh theater (“an ineffably lovely choreographed oratorio” – *TimeOut NY*); *Dream of Zeus* (2004) (“a strong, disturbing score” – *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*) and *Psyche* (2008) draw upon ancient Greek tragedy (“Conflict is his [Fisher's] theme, not his method; his music coexists with other arts in a harmonious balance that must be something like what Wagner was groping for when he came up with his theories of the 'total art work.' ” – *The Seattle Weekly*).

## 4 About the Fisher Ensemble

Known for its unique ability to conjure austere sensual worlds, the Fisher Ensemble is a Seattle-based performance troupe led by composer Garrett Fisher. The Ensemble's eclectic mix of vocalists, movers, actors and musicians harness ritual and myth to bridge ancient and modern forms.

With frequent collaborators Christy Fisher, AC Petersen, Ken Cerniglia, and Louise McCagg, the Fisher Ensemble has created several performance pieces that have been presented at The Chapel, Consolidated Works, the Nippon Kan Theater, and On the Boards in Seattle, WA; HERE Arts Center and Judson Memorial Church in New York City; and several venues in between.

Highlights of the last ten years include the release of *The Passion of Saint Thomas More* on BIS, which is included in the label's 30-CD/30-year commemorative edition, and the production of *Psyche* designated "Best of '08" by The Seattle Magazine.

Garrett Fisher and the Ensemble have received support from 4culture, the Allied Arts Foundation, the ASCAP Foundation/Morton Gould Young Composer Award, Bossack Heilbron Foundation, Centrum Arts Colony, City Artists, the King County Arts Commission, Puffin Foundation, the Seattle Arts Commission and the Wiggly World Foundation.

## 5 Recent Reviews

“Using Japanese Noh to Lift a Celtic Myth,” *The New York Times*, Steve Smith, March 22, 2010

### *Using Japanese Noh to Lift a Celtic Myth*

Mythology, conflict and transformation are recurring elements in the distinctive body of work the Seattle composer Garrett Fisher has created since

#### MUSIC REVIEW

STEVE  
SMITH

founding his performance troupe, the Fisher Ensemble, in 1995. In a series of theatrical works based on subjects from history and myth, Mr. Fisher has combined elements of opera, dance, Indian raga, Japanese Noh theater and more into fusions that have both a ritualistic intensity and an improvisatory freedom.

Mr. Fisher has occasionally brought some of these productions to New York. On Saturday at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, he led his ensemble in his ninth and most recent music-theater piece, “At the Hawk’s Well,” based on a 1916 one-act play by William Butler Yeats. Among the performers in Mr. Fisher’s ensemble, mostly from Seattle, was a New York new-music luminary, the flutist Margaret Lancaster.

Like Mr. Fisher’s work, Yeats’s play was a groundbreaking hybrid. Introduced to Noh by Ezra Pound, Yeats adopted its severe style and formal strictures to portray an episode from the saga of Cuchulain, a mythological Irish hero. In the short, symbolic drama, Cuchulain encounters an old man who has spent 50 years at a well whose waters confer immortality, but which is protected by a hawklike female Guardian.

In his 50-minute adaptation Mr. Fisher incorporated haikus by Basho and Buson among sec-

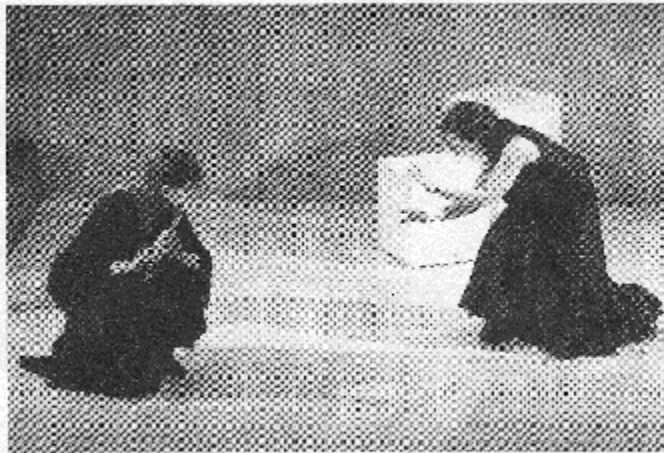


ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

At the Hawk’s Well, performed by the Fisher Ensemble at Judson Memorial Church, with Margaret Lancaster, left, and Christy Fisher.

tions of Yeats’s text. Noh calls for a flutist and three drummers; Yeats requested a drum, a gong and a zither. Mr. Fisher’s ensemble suggested aspects of both: in addition to his harmonium and Ms. Lancaster’s flutes, the group featured Greg Bagley, playing a fretted six-string acoustic bass guitar that could sound like a koto, and Dean Moore, a percussionist.

After Ms. Lancaster played a fluttering, swooping unaccompanied introduction, “Hawk Raga,” from a balcony behind the audience, three black-robed vocalists — Shawna Avinger, a soprano; Kristen Ramer Liang, a mezzo-soprano; and Jeremiah Cawley, a baritone and the ensemble’s music director — entered, moving up the aisle and singing a hymnlike processional with consonant harmony and vibratoless tone.

One early section of the performance featured the recorded voice of David Stutz, a bass-baritone, altered with an eerie resonance. Elsewhere the three singers, using two plaster masks and singing in English and Japanese, shared two principal roles, the Old Man and the Young Man. They frequently acted in silhouette behind two backlit white screens; between them a series of white blocks represented a craggy mountainside.

Christy Fisher, a dancer and Mr. Fisher’s sister, played the Guardian with sweeping arms, birdlike twitches and fierce stomps. Twice Ms. Lancaster joined her, matching her animated steps and lending voice to her urgent gestures. In the end, for all the variety of its borrowings, what resulted was a strong, unified and strikingly individual utterance of unambiguous beauty.

“He Crosses Borders: A Cultural Conversation with Garrett Fisher,”  
*The Wall Street Journal*, Brett Campbell, March 16, 2010

BY BRETT CAMPBELL

*I call to the eye of the mind  
 A well long choked up and  
 dry  
 And boughs long stripped by  
 the wind,  
 And I call to the mind's eye  
 Pallor of an ivory face,  
 Its lofty dissolute air,  
 A man climbing up to a place  
 The salt sea wind has swept  
 bare.*

**T**he opening lines of W.B. Yeats's 1916 play, "At the Hawk's Well," chanted by a trio of black-clad, white-masked singers last month here at the Chapel Performance Space, invoke the spirit of both the Japanese Noh drama that inspired its poet-playwright's tale—of a young man and old man in conflict at a magical well whose waters grant immortality—and the aesthetic of composer Garrett Fisher. His spare yet gripping new setting of the play draws its power from the mind's eye—the audience's imagination—as much as from his iridescent music.

Like his other musical dramas, Mr. Fisher's new one-act opera employs antique, often non-Western dramatic forms and musical influences to conjure an exotic atmosphere. His interest in other times and places was sparked early, when his professor parents took the family to Istanbul for a year, where they visited mosques and architectural sites. "Being an outsider in a separate culture probably made me attuned to the depth of tradition and beauty" in ancient cultures, he says. At Oberlin College, Mr. Fisher explored a wide range of traditions, from Shakespeare to Chinese opera. "I think this combination of influences inspired me to try to come up with my own theatrical form that also blended different media in an organic way," he says. "With theater that's very formalized, the audience is forced to sit forward in their seats, use their imagination, and become an engaged collaborator in the process," Mr. Fisher explains.

After he moved to Seattle in 1994, that city's renowned early-music scene drew Mr. Fisher toward medieval, Baroque and other pre-Classical sounds. He also took lessons in Indian vocal music and began



playing the Indian harmonium. Most of his projects since then—including "The Passion of Saint Thomas More"; "Moon in the Bucket," based on a 14th-century Noh play; "Stargazer," about Galileo; and "Psyche," based on the Greek myth—rely on venerable musical and theatrical forms from Eastern and Western cultures as tools of expression.

Not that Mr. Fisher is averse to modern means. The 39-year-old composer is using the Internet to reach audiences. His opera "The Passion of Saint Sebastian" is part of a competition in which anyone can download the soundtrack and create a short Internet film based on any part of it. With little more than two weeks left until the March 31 deadline, 205 filmmakers have already signed up. And Mr. Fisher has begun to adapt his operas to the Web. "Videos of live performances are often flat and don't capture the magic," he admits, but Internet films allow visual artists to be creative and budget-minded; they become interpretations of the music which are different, but just as moving, as live performances, he said. "When embedded into a site on the Web, they explore new ways of experiencing music, visuals and stories. Also, it reflects our global age, where anyone with access to the Internet can take part in the cre-

ative process."

In the past 16 years, Mr. Fisher has created eight chamber operas and numerous other works, winning increasing attention and acclaim. Working consistently with a close-knit group—friends and family, including his dancer-choreographer sister, Christy; his mask-making godmother, Louise McCagg; and the New York-based dramaturg Ken Cerniglia—he allows other artists to contribute significantly to his productions, achieving a chemistry that encourages both efficiency and artistic risk-taking.

The entrepreneurial Mr. Fisher has managed to create a sustainable model for producing listener-friendly, multimedia musical dramas. He's formed a nonprofit organization and mastered the arcane art of garnering grants. And he's found a congenial if nontraditional venue in Seattle—the acoustically alluring Chapel, part of a former girls' reform school converted in 2007 into the city's most exciting wellspring of experimental performing arts.

"At the Hawk's Well," which The Fisher Ensemble will perform at Boston's Cathedral of St. Paul on March 17 and at New York's Judson Memorial Church on March 20, exemplifies Mr. Fisher's distilled method. Yeats's oblique text leaves ample space for the audience's

imagination, as well as interpolated haiku from the poets Basho and Buson. "It was really a wonderful challenge for me to make the play work as an opera," Mr. Fisher recalls. "There's such a simplicity in his language, but as you delve into it, it's like a very deep lake you can't ever get to the bottom of, and that's what makes him such an amazing poet."

Mr. Fisher wisely chose not to fill in the blanks. The single set—three white cubes flanked by a pair of shadow screens—minimal props and costumes, and Ms. McCagg's eerie white masks presented a nearly blank slate, lightly decorated with spare brush strokes: a modified flute that evoked the Japanese shakuhachi; a haunting, six-string fretted acoustic bass guitar that sounded variously like a koto or an oud; a sighing harmonium; intermittent percussion. The instrumental parts pulsed with a spontaneity born of the players' partly improvised contributions. Ms. Fisher's birdlike dance postures resembled a hawk's flutterings. Minimal lighting cues used color to signal tone shifts; touches of shadow theater rendered the mood even more mysterious.

As the splendid vocal trio intoned Yeats's resonant poetry, accompanied by Mr. Fisher's intimate yet spacious sounds and judiciously placed silences, the bare-bones tale receded like the well's elusive contents, but it didn't matter. When the spectacle ended after less than an hour, I felt like I was waking from a dream whose meaning wasn't quite clear, but whose redolent beauty made elaboration or explanation superfluous.

*Mr. Campbell covers West Coast performing arts for the Journal.*

“At the Hawk’s Well” *Seattle Weekly*, Gavin Borchert, March 9, 2010

### AT THE HAWK’S WELL

Chapel Performance Space, this past weekend.

With this, the latest of his meditative, ritualistic chamber operas, Seattle composer Garrett Fisher seems to have reached a new level of theatrical sureness. The mystery in the Noh-influenced W.B. Yeats play on which the piece is based is heightened as three black-clad singers (one man, two women) switch among them the opera’s two roles—Old Man and Young Man—by exchanging masks. Some of the text is in Japanese, some action takes place in shadowplay behind illuminated screens, and a prerecorded voice takes over at one point. The hawk of the title, guarding a well of immortality sought by the two Men, is played by dancer/choreographer Christy Fisher, with keenly observed bird-like movements.

She, the singers, and Fisher’s four-person orchestra are all billed together as the Fisher Ensemble and have built the piece collaboratively through improvisation on the leader’s generative ideas. Yeats’ Japanese inspiration is echoed here in the music: The flute evokes a shakuhachi, and the bass (a six-string fretted acoustic model, played by Greg Bagley) emulates the pitch-bending and silk-string purity of a koto—a funky koto with a subterranean low range. An array of percussion adds grit and atmosphere, while Fisher’s harmonium wafts aural incense over it all.

The wealth of attractive effects in the ensemble’s previous opera, *Psyche*, never seemed to hang together as expertly; the elegantly distilled, 45-minute *Well* is more all-of-a-piece. Later this month, Fisher is taking the show to Boston and New York, and perhaps his plans to put *Well* in front of non-Seattleite audiences has helped him focus. GAVIN BORCHERT

“At the Hawk’s Well Preview,” *Seattle Times*, Michael Upchurch, February 26, 2010

## CONCERT HALL

### Yeats tale shimmers in operatic adaptation

BY MICHAEL UPCHURCH  
*Seattle Times arts writer*

In his production notes for his 1916 play “At the Hawk’s Well,” Irish poet W.B. Yeats insisted that the masked face of each player should be “as much a work of art as the lines that he speaks or the costume that he wears, that all may be as artificial as possible.”

Seattle’s Fisher Ensemble, in a recent rehearsal, was clearly taking those words to heart in its new chamber-opera adaptation of Yeats’ tale about an old man and young man battling over a well with rare waters that bestow the gift of immortality.

Using masks, shadow play, stylized movement and gorgeous sound, the performers took a mannered, trance-inducing excursion through Yeats’ mythic realms. The voices — tenor, soprano, mezzo — wove melodic patterns of ever-finer intricacy from the simplest elements, and the instrumen-

#### PERFORMANCE PREVIEW

##### ‘At the Hawk’s Well’

The Fisher Ensemble, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Chapel Performance Space, Good Shepherd Center, Seattle; \$12-\$15 (800-838-3006 or [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com)).

tal ensemble punctuated the singers’ spare, seductive sound with minimal but atmospheric flourishes.

Composer Garrett Fisher, the leader of the group, has been mining a similar musical vein since his ensemble began mounting productions in the late 1990s. “The Passion of Saint Thomas More,” a beautifully recorded oratorio available on CD, shows Fisher at his best, incorporating folk, baroque, minimalist and Asian influences in ways that lean heavily on the familiar, yet are contemporary in their bending of harmonies and forging



PAUL BROWN

Christy Fisher of The Fisher Ensemble dances with a mask by Louise McCagg. The ensemble will perform “At the Hawk’s Well” Friday and Saturday.

of exotic timbres.

This is, in short, ravishing stuff. Choreographed by Christy Fisher (the composer’s sister, who also performs), “At the Hawk’s Well” draws not only on Yeats’ text but from the haiku of Basho and Buson. And it follows Yeats’ lead in employing the conventions of Japanese Noh theater. Those include subtle hand gestures, sometimes seen in silhouette, and a gender fluidity in casting, with roles being passed from singer to singer as masks move from hand to hand. (In “Thomas More,” the title role was played by a soprano — who was also one of three “dark angels” commenting on the action.)

Yeats suggested that a flute-zither-drum score accompany “Hawk’s Well,” and the Fisher Ensemble follows the spirit of his instructions. A kotolike “raga” on a quiet electric guitar opens the piece, while the percussion includes tambours and gongs (both bowed and struck). The drone of the harmonium supplies a steady, sumptuous backdrop of sound, punctuated by shriller

flights on the flute.

The three singers — Jeremiah Cawley, Maria Mannisto, Kristen Ramer — are masked and move in precise patterns. Christy Fisher, as the hawklike female guardian of the ungiuing well, actually dances with a precision both elastic and talon-sharp.

The artifice of the staging may not suit every taste, but the score approaches the sublime. “At the Hawk’s Well” promises to be an otherworldly recasting of a cautionary legend.

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“Noticed: Garrett Fisher Wows WSJ,” *CityArts*, Tim Appelo, March, 2010



Garrett Fisher with Judson ensembles. The *New Yorker* called him “the most alive the Wall Street Journal has for 100 years.”

**NOTICED**

**GARRETT FISHER WOWS WSJ**

Something unprecedented happened between the February performance of Garrett Fisher’s opera *At the Hawk’s Well* in Seattle and its March performance in New York’s famous Judson Memorial Church: a rave review/profile by *Wall Street Journal* West Coast performing arts critic Brett Campbell. “Loved it,” Campbell e-mailed *CityArts*. He’s never covered Seattle before in his ten years with the newspaper. “Among American composers of his generation, Garrett stands out because of the way he’s assimilated such diverse global musical and other artistic influences into a distinctive, original, yet listener-friendly sound. And

he’s successfully created a strong collaborative process for making multimedia productions that may be a sustainable model for independent twenty-first-century American composers.”

Fisher credits, for his success, his sister and choreographer, Christy Fisher, and his New York-based dramaturg Ken Ceremgia, who works with people like Jules Feiffer developing Disney Theatricals in New York. “If you look at the credits for *The Lion King*, you’ll see him listed as key dramaturg. For Julie Taymor – and me.” But he calls the WSJ coverage “unnerving. More exposure brings more risk – not merely in the possibility of rejection but of informed rejection.” TA

“Garrett Fisher-*At the Hawk’s Well*,” NewMusicBox, Molly Sheridan, March 16, 2010

There is a fluid back and forth motion across continents and centuries that impresses when it comes to the work of Garrett Fisher. It's showcased once again in his latest piece *At the Hawks Well*.

To build this production, Fisher adapted the original one-act play of the same name by William Butler Yeats, condensing the original text and working in haiku by Basho and Buson at key points. The underlying story is structured around an old man, a young man, a dried up well, and a hawk-like woman who guards it (its waters are believed to offer immortality). Even in Yeats's original script, the spare staging, the references to Noh drama, and the elaborate masks seem to make it a work particularly tailored to Fisher's sensibilities. Previous productions in this composer's catalog such as *The Passion of Saint Thomas More* capitalized effectively on similar constraints, particularly the stylized movement the characters employed and the masks created by Louise McCagg (who returns to collaborate on *At the Hawk's Well*).

The piece is scored for three singers (soprano, mezzo soprano, and tenor), who merge to form a chorus of voices (new music pure, not operatic in style) and then separate to take turns performing the old and young man roles as the show progresses. The guardian is represented by a dancer, as well as by the piccolo/flute/alto flute line. In addition, there is percussion, a harmonium, and a six-string fretless bass.

Looking at the libretto, it appears that Fisher is once again holding to a working MO tied to collaboration. He provides a complete framework and instruction for how he wishes the piece to unfold, but one that also leaves room for freely sung sections and for the performers to contribute their own creativity to the project. In this case, as in previous compositions, the final result is a work that is rich and deeply affecting, and yet spare and spiritual enough to draw a listener in much more intimately than more elaborate opera productions. A simple plucked bass line or harmonium drone supports the strong, clear voices without rushing them along. Fisher's music seems to have gathered influences from music across time and geography—echoes of Asia, India, and Europe color the lines—and distilled these points of reference down to something that speaks quite strongly to and through this small group of performers. Using this palette, they spin out a tale of tragic beauty that's at once as familiar as a favorite fairytale and yet offers something fresh and unique.

Though not currently available commercially on recording, the production will make stops in two East Coast cities this week: Boston on March 17 @ Cathedral of Saint Paul, 12 p.m. and NYC on March 20 @ Judson Memorial Church, 2 and 8 p.m.

“The Fisher Ensemble’s *At the Hawk’s Well*,” *Gathering Note*, Harlan Glotzer  
February 28, 2010

Entering the Chapel at the Good Shepherd Center this evening, I was struck with the calm and focus of a dedicated artistic space. This was largely due to the beautiful ambiance of the stage and sonic arena created by the Fisher Ensemble for the world premiere of the piece *At the Hawk’s Well* even before it officially began. I was greeted by a stage, though stark, not lacking in visual interest. Two paper masks created by Louise McCagg sat atop three blocks arranged in a stair pattern, which was in turn flanked by two white screens lit from behind. Simple blacks and whites, but I couldn’t help but follow my eyes around the set three or four times before I felt satisfied that I had truly seen the initial image. The strong but soothing angles were accompanied by prerecorded recitation. I could not quite make out what I was hearing, but the male voice on the PA was smooth and low. I could pick out a word or two here and there, but it seemed less important what was being said and more the flavor of how the sounds filled the architecture of the stage. All this before the music even started! I knew I was in for a treat.

The Fisher Ensemble has been a multidisciplinary performance troupe with headquarters in Seattle since 1995. Founded and directed by composer Garrett Fisher, the ensemble has produced 8 full length operas and still flourish under Fisher's conception of process driven music. In the post concert panel Fisher talked about how he begins crafting the music with an idea that is typically adapted or inspired by narrative. This could be a story, historical event, historical figure, theatrical work, etc. From this material Fisher creates conceptual ideas, sketches, themes, and codifies the skeleton of the piece. Then the interaction begins with the performers and the specific ensemble for the project. The pieces are worked out to Fisher's outlined conception, while still allowing the performers the chance to infuse their own artistic character in the piece. Once this is established in rehearsal, it doesn't change much from performance to performance, and yet there is still some slight room for spontaneity keeping the piece consistently fresh.

This evenings work took it's Fisher Skeleton from the W. B. Yeats play by the same name, but reached back even further to Yeats' inspiration of Noh theatre. From that place Haiku by Basho and Buson were utilized and infused into the work. A short introductory solo flute piece titled Hawk Raga for Flute defined the mood above and beyond the stage positioning. Clifford Dunn expertly embodied the breathy and sighing sound of a shakuhachi. The raga began slow, with lilting mournful low tones that were eventually whipped into a fury of notes climaxing with humming notes and split harmonics. The busyness was tempered once again with a return to the placid low tones. Throughout the whole of this short introductory solo Dunn created an entirely wooden sound on his flute that was designed for full quarter-tone possibilities and has been recently evolved into a copy of the Robert Dick flute.

At the Hawk's Well opened with a very tender and mournful bass solo by bassist Greg Bagley on 6 string acoustic bass. As this chordal and almost polyphonic solo texture grew the harmonium and vocalists entered the mix. Reminiscent of a choir and organ, the harmonic integrity was wholly modern while simultaneously evoking an ominous chill down my spine and the warm comforts of brandy and a roaring fire. The vocal character felt delightfully restrained, but during a moment of climax the clarion voice of Maria Mannisto rung through. Absolutely magnificent. My only regret is that there were not more than a few moments where Mannisto's power could be unleashed. This overture of sorts continued as the singers proceeded to the stage and expertly outlined the scene vocally before absconding with their character masks. The music returned to the somber exposed bass, and the stage returned to black.

The next events unfolded in a completely new and riveting way, and yet still felt intrinsically connected as a logical progression. As the lights came up, the backlit screens were each occupied by a character. The choreographer and dancer Christy Fisher appeared on the right amidst the chirping flutter of Dunn's piccolo. Fisher's movements were exquisite, precise, and not once left the personal screen her silhouette inhabited. Throughout the entire evening I was constantly confronted with the refinement of the Fisher Ensemble. Every note, every step, every action, every movement was controlled, deliberate, and (most importantly) contributed to the whole of the piece. The care in distillation to the necessary elements astounded me.

The rest of the evening was filled with continually escalating moments of artistic rapture. The fluidity of the Fisher Ensemble was palpable, and nothing stayed rigid the whole evening. Characters were embodied by not the singer, but the mask they carried. Each of the three vocalists got a chance to create both of the speaking roles—the Old Man and the Boy—in the run of the performance, and each with their own personal touch and abilities. If I were to point to one specific detail that moved me in *At the Hawk's Well* I would first respond that there were too many. After thinking on it though, I would have to say the balance of artistic content and the propulsion of the story was in perfect proportion. Also, the length left me wanting more and not checking my watch.

The Fisher Ensemble will be taking this piece in March to the east coast, and the opposite end of the country is certainly in for a treat. Wednesday, March 17th at the Cathedral of Saint Paul (12 PM) in Boston, and two shows Saturday, March 20th at the Judson Memorial Church in New York (2 PM & 8 PM). Shows on this east coast will have vocalist Shawna Avinger in place of Maria Mannisto, Margaret Lancaster on flutes in place of Clifford Dunn, and Garrett Fisher playing harmonium in place of Esther Sugai.

## 6 Other Reviews

"a haunting, ineffably lovely choreographed oratorio" —*TimeOut NY*

"Spare, elegant, and beautiful." —*TimeOut NY*

"Hypnotic, magical, enchanting and moving...[with] touches of pure dramatic genius." —*Gramophone*

"This is simply one of the most beautiful CDs I have ever reviewed." —*Fanfare*

"The focus and beauty of the work stunned me." —*The Seattle Weekly*

"Haunting in its simplicity...Fisher's laudable objective clearly has been to universalize the story through a ritualistic stylization that treats the music in the most traditional way possible: not as 'representation' or some abstract concept or event, but as a means of elevating the expressive impact of the text." —*Classics Today*

"Fisher has a long history of collaboration in the creation of his work: singers and instrumentalists, stage directors and designers, actors and dancers." —*The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

"A strong, disturbing score...Fisher creates a sense of foreboding and dread that builds as the work progresses."

—*The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

"Provocative...effective and telling" —*The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

"The music was haunting and the integration of movement skillful." —*The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

"Fisher's music is as controlled, narrowly focused and dramatic as his libretto." —*The Seattle Times*

## 7 Performer Biographies

### **Ken Cerniglia (dramaturg)**

Ken has collaborated with the Fisher Ensemble for six times in five years, including dramaturging and directing *Psyche* in 2008, *Stargazer* in 2006 and directing *The Passion of Saint Thomas More* in 2007. When not working on freelance projects, Ken has a full creative plate as dramaturg and literary manager for Disney Theatrical Group in New York, where he has worked on over twenty shows including as dramaturg for Julie Taymor's *The Lion King*.

### **Christy Fisher (Choreographer)**

Christy has enjoyed collaborating with Garrett for the last 15 years, presenting work at the HERE Center's American Living Room Series (NYC), Judson Church (NYC), On the Boards Northwest New Works Festivals, On the Boards Artist Access Programs, and Centrum (Port Townsend). Christy has presented solo work at Movement Research (NYC), On the Boards, and the Seattle Art Museum. She has performed with Works/Laura Glenn Dance (Hartford/NYC) and with Haruko Nishimura/ Degenerate Art Ensemble (Seattle). Christy also produces !!Artslaunch!!, a bi-annual, interdisciplinary forum for Seattle's visual, literary and performing artists. In 2008 Christy choreographed and co-directed the Fisher Ensemble's productions of *Psyche* and *Moon in the Bucket*.

### **Louise McCagg (Sculptor)**

Louise has been collaborating with Garrett Fisher since 1994 in five of his productions. A New York-based artist, Louise has been exploring methods of sculpting without mimicking the human form: she makes "face prints" of people's faces, then shrinks the heads to the dimensions she needs. She uses masks in many forms, materials and contexts, ranging from bronze sculpture to books and postcards. For this production she used life-sized masks. Louise has shown her work regularly throughout the United States and Europe, including the A.I.R. Gallery (New York), 128 Gallery (New York), Hebrew Union College (New York), Hungarian Cultural Institute (Berlin, Germany), 2B Gallery (Budapest, Hungary), Sejong Arts Festival (Seoul, Korea), and is part of the Mills College, Yale library, and University of California (Stanford) collections.

### **Margaret Lancaster (Flute)**

Hailed as "our leading exponent of the avant-garde flute" (Kyle Gann, Village Voice), Margaret Lancaster has premiered over 100 pieces and has built a large repertoire of new works composed specifically for her that employ extended techniques, dance, drama, multi-media and electronics. Performance highlights include Lincoln Center Festival, Spoleto Festival USA, Ibsen Festival, Santa Fe New Music, Whitney Museum, Edinburgh Festival and Festival D'Automne. She has recorded on New World Records, OO Discs, Innova, Naxos and Tzadik, and was selected for Meet the Composer's New Works for Soloist Champions project. Noted for her inter-disciplinary performances, Lancaster, who also works as a

choreographer, dancer, and actor and amateur furniture designer, presents solo and chamber music concerts worldwide and acts in Lee Breuer's OBIE-winning Mabou Mines Dollhouse.

### **Dean Moore (Percussion)**

Dean is a percussionist who performs with a variety of collaborative projects, and is also a solo performer. He specializes in playing music for gongs and other resonate metals. Dean is a member of Eye Music, a group dedicated to interpreting existing graphic scores as well as composing new scores. Dean has been working with Garrett Fisher and the Fisher Ensemble since 2005. He has performed with The Aono Jikken Ensemble, most recently as part of a live foley team performing an original foley sound score for Guy Maddin's latest silent film "Brand Upon The Brain". Dean has performed and composed music for local dance companies and was also a founding member of Circus Contraption.

### **Kamala Sankaram (Vocalist)**

As a composer and performer, Kamala Sankaram has collaborated with a diverse group of artists including the Philip Glass Ensemble (Einstein on the Beach), the Wooster Group (LA DIDONE), and the Albany Symphony Orchestra. She has recorded with Phil Kline (Around the World in a Daze: Starkland Records), End (The Sick Generation: Hymen Records), Death Comet Crew (Dominatrix), the Albany Symphony Orchestra and Anti-Social Music. Her compositions have been featured as part of the Bang on a Can Summer Festival, the Santa Fe New Music Festival, the Lucerne Festival, the Music with a View Festival at the Flea Theater, and in the article "More Song, Less Art(ifice): The New Breed of Art Song" in New Music Box magazine. She had the featured commission on New York's 20thC Liederabend, chosen as one of TimeOut's Best Classical Concerts of 2009. Additionally, she composed the music for DENTIST, selected for the Children's Film Program of the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival. She is a resident artist at HERE, developing a multi-media chamber operetta, and a board member of Anti-Social Music. Current projects include music for SOUNDING (directed by Kristin Marting and written by Jennifer Gibbs, premiering at HERE in February 2010) and the upcoming recording of Anthony Braxton's new opera TRILLIUM. In addition to her musical pursuits, Kamala is a voiceover actress who has created characters for the Cartoon Network and Comedy Central, and is ABD for a doctorate in psychology at the New School for Social Research.

## 8 Libretto

### Performance Locations

- **Station 1: Cocoon/Cryptlike Space:** where the piece opens (Prelude).
- **Station 2: Main Space:** where the audience is led, and where the Priest first meets Kocho.
- **Station 3: Plight Stations:** various locations, where singers/ensemble perform the “plights”
- **Station 4: Final Station:** where all ensemble members go at the end.

### Characters

- **Kocho (the butterfly):** Soprano, Dancer, and Flute player (3 people)
- **Priest:** Mezzo Soprano
- **Chorus & Plight Kochos:** up to 5 other singers
- **Ensemble:** Indian harmonium, gongs, trombone, recorded sounds

### Prelude

Gongs and dance. This would be performed at the “entrance” of the piece, which would be in The Cocoon. The audience moves in and around the performance.

### Scene 1: Kocho In The Distance

Alto flute plays the Kocho Raga, summoning the audience to the next station, the Main Space.

### Scene 2: Priest Enters

The Priest (mezzo) sings with the ensemble.

Priest: Haru tatsu sora no tabi-goromo  
Haru tatsu sora no tabi-goromo  
Hi mo nodoka naru yama-ji kana  
*With spring in the sky, we don our travel robes*  
*With spring in the sky, we done our travel robes*  
*Their strings long as placid daylight on the hills*

Hiroki mi-kage no michi sugu ni  
Hana no miyako ni tsukinikeri  
Hana no miyako ni tsukinikeri.  
*Broad runs the way under the righteous reign*

*That soon brought us to the flowery capital,  
That soon brought us to the flowery capital.*

### **Scene 3: Priest Arrives**

The Priest “arrives.”

Priest: Isogi soro aida  
Hodo no miyako ni tsukite soro  
*We have traveled fast and  
Before long we have arrived at the capital.*

Hiroki mi-kage no michi sugu ni  
*Broad runs the way under the righteous reign*

### **Scene 4: Kocho Appears**

The Flute can be heard in the distance.<sup>1</sup> As the flutist plays the Kocho Raga<sup>2</sup> (with recorded keyboard), he/she enters into the Main Space. The Soprano and the Dancer – who are also Kocho – are also present.

### **Scene 5: The Priest and Kocho Speak**

Priest: Sate koko oba izuku to moshi soro zo  
*Now, what place is this?*

Kocho: Ah-  
Sate wa hajimetaru  
On-koto nite mashimasu kaya  
*I see that you are new to this place.*

Priest: Tokoro karu

Kocho: na-ru kono

Kocho & Priest: nme o

*here under this plum tree*

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<sup>1</sup> I think up to this point, the flutist has been out of site, even when the Flute is summoning the audience to the “main meeting space.”

<sup>2</sup> The Kocho Raga includes a quartertone between the Major and Minor 3<sup>rd</sup> and plays with it – sometimes resolving up to the “happy” Major 3<sup>rd</sup>, and sometimes resolving down to the “sad” Minor 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Priest: Sate sate on-mi wa ikanaru hito zo.  
*But I wonder who you are.*

Kocho: Sonata no na koso kikama-hoshikere  
*I ought to know your name first.*

Priest: Meisho niwa sumedomo kokoronaki<sup>3</sup>  
*Though I live in a renowned place,  
I am a witless mountain dweller*

[Simsing:

Kocho & Priest: Sumu ie-zakura iro kaete  
Koro wa miyako no hana-zakari  
*Used to the homely flower, of different color  
Is this capital flower in full bloom*

]

Priest: Kokoro o to mete  
*In rapt attention I look at*

Kocho: Iro fukaki  
*Its crimson deep.*

## Scene 6: To The Sweet Plum Blossoms

Kocho and the Priest sing with ensemble. Other singers that are in the next scene could also be singing this as a Chorus, also in the same space.

Kocho, Priest, Chorus:

“Nme ga ka ni  
Mukashi o toeba haru no tsuki  
Mukashi o toeba haru no tsuki  
Kotaenu kage” mo waga sode ni  
Utsuru nioi mo toshi o furu  
Kokiu no noki-ba koke mushite  
Mukashi koishiki waga na oba  
Nani to Akashi no Ura ni sumu

*“To the sweet plum blooms  
I ask about the past, and the spring moon,  
I ask about the past, and the spring moon,*

---

<sup>3</sup> I am not including this, but I’m nonetheless adding some of the English words:

Mi wa yamagatsu no toshi o hete  
*I am a witless mountain dweller, for many a year*

*Casts a silent shadow on my sleeves”  
Soaked with fragrances of many a spring,  
The age-old palace eaves moss-grown  
Stirring wistful memories in me. But my name—  
How can I tell it? On Akashi Bay I live<sup>4</sup>*

## **Scene 7: The 5 Plights of Kocho**

The sound of a singing bowl is heard in the distance, summoning the audience further into the space, the Plight Stations. During this interlude, the Chorus would go their respective Plight Stations.

As Kocho (soprano) guides the audience toward the Plight Stations.

Kocho: Makoto wa ware wa ningen ni arazu.  
Kocho-o no yume no  
Tawamure nari.  
*In truth, human I am not.  
The dream butterfly  
At play, that’s what I am.*

## **Scene 8 (a-e): The 5 Plights of Kocho: Simultaneous Scenes**

This Scene is comprised of (at least) 5 scenes which occur simultaneously, each one performed solo by a member of the ensemble and/or the Chorus. Each performer would perform one “piece” at a Plight Station that is “composed” for a specific place.<sup>5</sup>

Words, sung/spoken by Chorus Performers could include:

Geni ya iro ni somi  
Hana ni nare-yuku adashi-mi wa.  
*Indeed, deep-absorbed in color,  
To the flower clings the amorous heart.*

Chigiri o musubu mi nishi aredomo  
Baika ni en naki mi o nageki  
*Although I am fated to make love’s pledge,  
Estrangement from the plum blossom is my grief.*

Kuru haru goto ni kanashimi no  
Namida no iro mo  
Kurenai no

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<sup>4</sup> I like the fact that the narrator is from Akashi Bay, as the Ghost Sisters in *Moon in the Bucket* are from Akashi Bay.

<sup>5</sup> I.e., different works of art.

Baika ni en naki kono mi nari.  
*Every year when spring comes round, I weep,  
The very tears colored  
The deep crimson of  
Plum blossoms whose company I am never to enjoy.*

Additional texts could be written by contemporary poets/authors that relate to the locations, as well as the meaning of the libretto. One text could be the result of a haiku/poetry competition. In addition, I could have a music raga competition that relates to one scene – perhaps performed by the flutist. The music could be based on more abstract ragas, which can be used in any production/location, but applied to specific locations.

While each Station will be in a separate location, the pieces' sounds might overlap; as a result, the sounds of each piece must be in congruent with the others. Maybe there could be a harmonium chord in the middle that blends them all together. The melodic instruments could perform based on the raga that the flute plays earlier.

These scenes would auto-loop for a specific period of time. The audience could roam through the space, and move from scene to scene in any order.

## **Scene 9: Kocho Makes a Request**

The sounds of the diverse pieces begin to synchronize. Maybe all performers (singers?) could converge as they sing this (maybe as a chant or a round), and led by the Priest move to Final Station.

Tae naru nori no  
Hachisu-ba no  
Hana no utena o  
Tanomu nari.  
*That, by the blessed Law,  
On the lotus leaves  
The flowery dais  
Be granted to me.*

## **Scene 10: The Priest Responds**

The Priest sings, perhaps without accompaniment, at the Final Station.

The Priest: Kocho-o nimo  
Sasowarenamashi  
*By the butterfly  
I would let me be lured.*

## Scene 11: Instrumental interlude

We hear the trombone in the distance. The flute, gongs, harmonium also play as all singers move to a new position.

## Scene 12: Kocho Dances

A group song, sung in meter – probably 4/4.<sup>6</sup> Maybe this is a dance piece, performed by the dancer.

All singers: Haru natsu aki no  
Hana mo tsukite  
Shimo o obitaru  
Shira-giku no  
Hana ori-nokosu  
Eda o meguri  
Meguri meguru ya  
Kocho-o  
Haru no yo no  
Ake-yuku kumo ni  
Hane uchi-kawashi  
Ake-yuku kumo ni  
Hane uchi-kawashite  
Kasumi ni magirete  
Usenikeri.

*Spring, summer and autumn  
Flowers have all gone  
Wearing a coat of frost  
White chrisnthemum  
Blossoms still remain unplucked.  
About its branches  
Dancing round and round,  
The butterfly  
On this night of spring.  
Against dawn's gleaming clouds  
Flutter her wings as she flies,  
Against dawn's gleaming clouds  
Flutter her wings as she flies  
Till, mingling with the mist,  
She was seen no more.*

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<sup>6</sup> I like the sing-songy rhythm of some of the words – I'm not sure if I could keep all the words, or just the ones that have more rhythm.

## 9 Photo Gallery







Credits: *At the Hawk's Well*: Photos courtesy of Paul Joseph Brown. Masks: Louise McCagg. Choreography & Direction: Christy Fisher. Performers: Maria Mannisto, Christy Fisher, Jeremiah Cawley, Kristen Ramer Liang.