

Grawemeyer Awards.

Nontraditional choral work wins 2024 music composition prize

By Denise Fitzpatrick

Serbian-American composer Aleksandra Vrebalov has won the 2024 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Music Composition for “Missa Supratext,” a nontraditional choral work for string quartet and girls’ chorus.

Kronos Quartet, a group long known for nurturing musical innovation, and San Francisco Girls’ Chorus, a Bay Area group for young women from diverse backgrounds, premiered the 22-minute work in 2018 in San Francisco with Valerie Sainte-Agathe conducting. The piece also incorporates bells, Tibetan bowls and musical saw.

“‘[Missa Supratext](#)’ is unrelated to any religion because the creative force driving all life does not care about culture, language or religion,” Vrebalov said. “The words are made up and have no meaning. The piece goes beyond verbal narrative to show how all life on our planet is interconnected.”

The work’s Latin title translates to “Mass Above Words” in English.

“Vrebalov’s music transports and envelops the listener,” said Matthew Ertz, music award director. “Her winning piece emphasizes the universality of human expression through music, bypassing a single language, style or tradition. She blends together diverse harmonies, rhythms, styles and improvisations, conveying her devotion to music and to the uniqueness of all things.”

[Vrebalov](#), 53, who lives in New York City, moved to the United States in 1995 and became a U.S. citizen in 2015. She has composed more than 90 works, including orchestral, chamber, opera and experimental pieces. She often starts by drawing and painting colorful images reflecting her ideas before converting the images into musical notation.

Ensembles worldwide have performed her compositions. Kronos Quartet alone has premiered 15 since 1997, and more than 25 other organizations such as Carnegie Hall and the English National Ballet have commissioned her work. Composers Edition in the United Kingdom distributes her self-published scores.

Vrebalov taught music at Serbia’s Novi Sad University and City University of New York and has been a resident or visiting artist on three continents. The Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Golden Emblem from the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs are among her honors.