

Eric Banks, Founding Director

1815 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue · Seattle WA 98122-3014 · 206.935.7779

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Media contact: Scott Kovacs ([scott@TheEsoterics.org](mailto:scott@TheEsoterics.org))

## APPROACHING ECSTASY

SEATTLE: In a highly-anticipated collaboration with Whim W'Him, Saint Helens String Quartet, and the Intiman Theatre, **The Esoterics** is excited to present the world premiere of *Approaching ecstasy*, a concert-length contemporary ballet based on the life and poetry of the Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy. This new 90-minute work, which was composed and will be conducted by Founding Director Eric Banks, will be sung by 40 voices of The Esoterics, accompanied by the Saint Helens String Quartet and harpist Melissa Achten. *Approaching ecstasy* will feature 7 dancers from Whim W'Him, choreographed by founding director Olivier Wevers, and Casey Curran's innovative set design will set the stage of Seattle's Intiman Theatre into perpetual motion.

The seeds for this collaboration were planted in the summer of 2008, when Banks traveled to Egypt, and while in Alexandria, visited the home of his favorite poet, Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933). Upon his return to Seattle, Eric met Olivier (who was then still dancing at Pacific Northwest Ballet, before he founded Whim W'Him), and shared a number of Cavafy's poems with him. Cavafy's work immediately appealed to both, and inspired them to create this collaborative piece around the life and work of the poet.

In *Approaching ecstasy*, Banks has set eighteen of Cavafy's poems – in both the original Greek, and in his own English translation. These poems describe Cavafy's secret life as a gay man living in Egypt a century ago. The poems that Banks chose are vivid portraits of his lovers as well as his friends, “expressions of fear, hope, remembered love, and excruciating beauty.” Cavafy's verses are clandestine, courageous, intensely intimate, and inspire hope for the openness of a future society. After choosing the poems and winning a *Seattle City Artist Award* to compose this work, Banks began to compose *Approaching ecstasy* last May, and finished the score in January.

Wevers' choreography will interpret the sensuality and sincerity of the poet's desire, as well as express the frustration, danger, and oppression that Cavafy must have experienced in his daily life. The Esoterics will be singing in alternating Greek and English, with both instruments and *a cappella*, in ensembles that range from a quartet of singers to the entire choral complement of 40. Banks' score incorporates North African musical influences (including Egyptian *maqamat* and *muwashahat* – scales and rhythmic patterns) in juxtaposition with Western musical elements – to represent the cultural confluences of Alexandria at the turn of the last century.

Banks and Wevers have striven to create a work that will break the mold on contemporary dance and choral performance. Whim W'Him and The Esoterics are honored that this premiere will be included in Seattle Center's “The Next 50” celebration. Please join us for one of these three performances of *Approaching ecstasy*:

**Intiman Theatre**  
201 Mercer Street · Seattle

Friday · 18 May 2012 · 8 pm  
Saturday · 19 May 2012 · 8 pm  
Sunday · 20 May 2012 · 5 pm

Tickets for this event are now available for purchase at <http://BrownPaperTickets.com>.

### A creative community of virtuosic voices

The Esoterics is a Seattle-based vocal ensemble dedicated to performing and perpetuating contemporary *a cappella* choral settings of poetry, philosophy, and spiritual writings from around the world. While cultivating artistic expression and cultural understanding among its singers and audience alike, The Esoterics aspires to reflect the beauty, power, and significance inherent in the music of our time.

**Eric Banks** has garnered international acclaim as one of America's most innovative choral musicians – for his unwavering dedication to new music for unaccompanied chorus. Eric earned his BA in Composition (1990) at Yale University, and his Master's and Doctoral degrees in Music Theory and Choral Studies at the University of Washington. In 1997, Banks was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to study at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Stockholm; there Eric performed with several groups, including the Swedish Radio Choir and the Eric Ericson Chamber Choir. As a composer, Eric is drawn to ideas that are 'esoteric' in origin, and is inspired to express and elucidate texts that are undiscovered, under-represented, or not easily decipherable by a wider audience. In his music, Banks has harnessed his passions for foreign poetry, classical civilization, comparative religion, social justice, and natural science – to create choral works that reach far beyond the scope of the established *a cappella* canon. As a composer and choral scholar, Eric has been awarded several grants, from the Arch and Bruce Brown Foundation, 4Culture, Seattle City Artists, a composer's fellowship from Artist Trust and Washington State Arts Commission, three ASCAP Plus Awards, and two Creativity grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2010, Eric was granted the prestigious *Dale Warland Singers Commission Award* from Chorus America and the American Composers Forum, and he currently holds commissions from the Boston Children's Chorus, Cantori New York, Clerestory, Conspirare, Kitka, the Philippine Madrigal Singers, the Singapore Youth Ensemble, and Voces Nordicae. Eric taught music theory, history, musicianship, composition, and voice at Cornish College from 2004 to 2012, and has been a visiting scholar at the Cama Oriental Institute in Mumbai, India.

Now in its nineteenth season, **The Esoterics** has drawn local, national, and international praise for creating, discovering, and presenting programs of rarely-heard choral music, and for performing settings of poetry, philosophy, and spiritual writings from around the world. The Esoterics has performed over 300 concerts throughout the Pacific Northwest, has commissioned and premiered over 150 new works for *a cappella* voices in dozens of languages, and has mastered many of the most virtuosic choral works of the last century. Always on the search for the next choral masterpiece, The Esoterics inaugurated its annual choral composition competition, POLYPHONOS, in 2006. Through this competition, The Esoterics awards commissions to three winners each year – a national, an international, and a young composer (under age 30). As well, The Esoterics is the only choral ensemble in Washington State that grants continuing-education credit to its members who teach in the public schools. The Esoterics has released fourteen CD recordings to favorable reviews, and has been honored to compete in the Cork International Choral Festival (Ireland), the Certamen Coral de Tolosa (Spain), and the Harald Andersén International Choir Competition (Finland). The Esoterics' commitment to innovative concert repertoire has been recognized four times (in 2001, 2003, 2006, and 2008) with the ASCAP / Chorus America Award for Adventurous Programming of Contemporary Music. Last year, The Esoterics was honored to perform at the national conference of the American Choral Directors Association in Chicago.

If you have any questions about this project or The Esoterics in general, please contact Scott Kovacs at [scott@TheEsoterics.org](mailto:scott@TheEsoterics.org).

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