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Mary Lycan

By Fiona Morgan

She was simply looking for a place to sing. Mary Lycan had moved to Palo Alto, Calif., with her husband in 1992 while he pursued an academic fellowship at Stanford. She was "underemployed" that year and had time to pursue her lifelong passion for music when she stumbled upon the Peninsula Women's Chorus.

"When I stepped into that first rehearsal, the sound just blew me away." Most choirs have four parts: soprano, alto, tenor, bass. But this chorus embraced the upper registers in ways that recalled her years at a girls school in Connecticut, yet with mature, trained voices. It was "the first all-female community I had been in for 27 years," Lycan says. "The conductor was a woman, the accompanist was a woman." But something big was missing. "We were singing all music by male composers."

That's when Lycan began combing through the Stanford music library looking for work by women composers. Her first find, a set of Shakespeare poems set to music by the 19th-century American composer Amy Beach, was the turning point in Lycan's musical life.

When she and her husband returned to Chapel Hill the following year, Lycan joined the women's glee club at UNC, made up mostly of undergraduates. It wasn't quite what she was looking for. "I realized that if I wanted to perform the music I wanted to hear, that I really needed to have my own chorus," she explains. She modeled the Women's Voices Chorus of Chapel Hill on the Peninsula chorus, but with the goal of performing half of its repertoire by female composers.

Women's Voices Chorus began in 1994 with some 25 women. It has grown to more than 50 members and performs at least three times a year. Simultaneously, Lycan's interest in finding music for women to sing grew into Treble Clef Press, a music publishing company she runs from her home. Besides rescuing lost work, she commissions original pieces and takes submissions. She has published 166 works so far, by women and men. The press provides the chorus with fresh material, and the chorus offers Lycan a laboratory for trying out the music. "I'm constantly aware that without the chorus, all this stuff that I find would be nothing but a pile of paper in my briefcase," she says. Treble Clef provides only a portion of what they sing, though--Lycan sees no reason to discriminate against those dead German guys with wigs.

I had the privilege of singing with them for one semester last year and watching Lycan work. She has an incredible ear for the way voices blend--she can change the sound by changing the seating chart. With her round glasses and mop of gray hair, she knows when to break the intensity of a two-and-a-half-hour rehearsal with a good laugh. She's patient but a perfectionist, which suits the singers, many of whom are accomplished musicians. "There are people in the chorus who catch mistakes in the score or who catch me letting a wrong note go by," Lycan says. The chorus is all-volunteer, except for the accompanist who is paid by a small tuition fee. The members encouraged Lycan to institute an attendance policy and to require an audition for membership. Volunteers lead sectional rehearsals, produce the program and take care of other non-musical tasks.

As the chorus grew, Lycan found a kindred spirit in UNC music librarian Ida Reed, who has helped her mine the archives and steer her to the right titles at the Library of Congress. "I've since found that people who've looked around for lost women whatever have the identical experience," she says. "Their first response is self-doubt: I think this is wonderful but if it's so good, why is it lost? Well, I was lucky in that when I founded a choir, I had a

way to find out."

In 1995, Lycan attended a national convention of choral directors where she heard publishers explain to frustrated conductors that music for SSA (soprano I, soprano II and alto) just won't sell. Having compiled a database of some 600 compositions, Lycan knew she could offer something that choruses desperately needed. She sold her first copies of the Beach compositions at the convention. Today the catalog ranges from sacred Latin to Appalachian folk to gospel music commissioned from Spelman College. They are sung in colleges, high schools, convents and children's choirs.

A great example is "Ecce Nunc," a sacred piece by the baroque composer Nicola Popora, composed in 1742 for a Venetian girls orphanage. Last fall Women's Voices Chorus gave the first public performance of that work in about 200 years, using an edition meticulously co-produced by Lycan. The only surviving copy was at the Library of Congress, on rag paper with a sewn binding. As with much old music, the score is written in old clefs with abbreviated Latin, funny spelling and confusing dynamics. Lycan and an editor deciphered the finer points in order to produce a version that's useful for the modern choir. And she won't let things go out of print. "Some of this repertoire has already died once, we don't want it to die again."

For more information, see the following Web sites:

www.womensvoiceschorus.org
www.trebleclefpress.com

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