



Women's Voices Chorus Provides Music to Nourish All Generations

by Ken Hoover

January 31, 2009, Durham, NC: In his 1850 essay "Judaism in Music," Richard Wagner makes the lame argument that Jewish art could never make an impact in the world because it lacked attachment to the national traditions that were so important to him. This despite the success and popularity of Meyerbeer, Halévy and Mendelssohn – all of whom had some influence on his early music. It was because of the Jewish Diaspora that their art failed, Wagner wrote. Yet Jewish art and culture have enriched all the corners of the world with Hasidic mysticism, Ashkenazi lyricism and depth, the blazing sad joy of the Sephardim, and the playful charm of 2nd Avenue Yiddish theatre. On and on we could trace the wealth that Jewish art, culture and faith has given to the generations, even the deaf ones. Tonight's concert in Duke Chapel, "Songs of Zion" was a gem, celebrating the gifts of Jewish composers, poets and textual sources. [Women's Voices Chorus](#) was at its apex, having worked very hard over several months under the gentle but demanding baton of Artistic Director, Allan Friedman. David Heid was as usual the masterful piano accompanist, filling in tonight for Deborah Coclanis.

The opening selection was my favorite of Aaron Copland's *Old American Songs*, "Zion's Walls," which the chorus sang without music folders open. It lacked vigor and didn't seem quite up to the tempo I expected, but from here on everything was uphill.

Arvo Pärt's "Peace Upon You Jerusalem" was typical of his style of music: mystical, with sustained tones rubbing up against dissonances like the overtones of bells. It was stunningly sung and soprano soloists Virginia Byers Kraus and Jo Edgley added bright overtones to the blend.

The vigor was definitely there in the Israeli Pioneer Song "Artsa Alinu," arranged by Nina Gilbert and sung a cappella by the Chamber Choir. It is a march of joy at planting time, looking forward to the coming harvest.

Eric Whitacre, one of the most popular of the new breed of outstanding choral composers, collaborated with his fiancé, Hila Plitmann on *Five Hebrew Love Songs*. She wrote the texts in the style of medieval troubadour songs. In the setting sung tonight the five songs; "Temuná" (A picture), "Kalá kallá" (Light bride), "Laróv" (Mostly), "Éyze shélg!" (What snow!), and "Rakút" (Tenderness), were scored for women's voices and string quartet with a speaking solo by Lisa Braden and soprano solo by Val Huysentruyt. Rich harmonies, inventive effects and fluid lines were rendered movingly.

The next selection was commissioned by WVC especially for this concert. [Caroline Mallonée](#) is an active composer, claiming a PhD from Duke and teaching at The Walden School for young composers in Dublin, New Hampshire. She also engages in a wide variety of music making. *What You Are* is a setting of three poems by Mark Strand for women's chorus and strings. The reflective and sensual text was set to reflective and descriptive music. Three movements, "The Dress," "Snowfall," and "Lines for Winter," draw the listener inward into a rather dark and chilling, but reaffirming place. The middle section was especially evocative in the onomatopoeic music style that almost made it feel like it was snowing in Duke Chapel. The chorus and strings did a remarkable job with music that was complex and challenging and beautifully effective. The strings for both of these last two pieces were provided by Ensemble Pro Cantores: violinists Anne Leyland, Suzanne Bolt, Tasi Matthews and Meredith Hawley and cellists Nate Leyland, Lisa Ferebee and Jane Salemon. They were outstanding.

After intermission, the chorus sang somewhat lighter fare beginning with a lively setting of Psalm 150 by Benjie Ellen Schiller. The chorus was joined for this selection by David Muñoz, guitar, Aidan Stallworth, percussion, and soprano soloist Rebecca Knickmeyer.

This was followed by three Yiddish songs: "Vus Vet Zayn," arranged by Stephen Hatfield, was sung by the Chamber Choir. "Papir iz Doch Vais," was arranged by Allan Friedman and sung by the whole chorus with brief solos by Mary Hoover and Joan Troy Ontjes delivered in an accomplished and effective manner. Next was "Ba Mir Bistu Sheyn" by the prolific Jewish composer Sholom Secunda and arranged by Joshua Jacobson, Music Director of the Zamir Chorale of Boston. This selection had a delightful coda in English by Sammy Cahn explaining the Yiddish text. Allison Mangin, Shipra Patel and Janet Hubner were soloists along with clarinetist Jordan Hutchinson. All displayed near professional security in their renditions.

The Chamber Choir sang "Eshet Khayil" based on text from Proverbs, music by Mordecai Seter, with Val Huysentruyt and Rhonda Matteson providing fine solos. Pablo Casals (the renowned cellist) composed the setting of "Nigra Sum," text from Song of Songs, which was sung beautifully by the full chorus.

The program closed with a Gospel rendition of "Miriam" by Liz Swandos and arranged by Joshua Jacobson, performed with guest soloist Francesca Lomuscio of the Durham School of the Arts belting it out. And finally the well-known African-American Spiritual "Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho," arranged by Marylou India Jackson.

For an encore Friedman wrote a prayer based on Psalm 133 "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" A flute solo, like a shepherd's pipe, calmly and lyrically introduced the piece, then the women sang unaccompanied the word "peace" in Hebrew, Latin and Arabic. It was a beautiful benediction to a very fine evening. This music is a great gift to nourish our generation and all generations past and to come.

Note: The reviewer's wife is a member of Women's Voices Chorus

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