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CHORAL MUSIC REVIEW

Women's Voices Chorus Presents Its Finest and Most Polished Concert Yet

By [Ken Hoover](#)

January 21, 2018 - Chapel Hill, NC:



[Women's Voices Chorus](#) singing at [University United Methodist Church](#), Chapel Hill was superbly in the groove for this concert that explored themes of war, the wish for peace, and the redemptive powers of nature, love, and mercy. Starting with a poly-choral piece by the Japanese composer and conductor, Ko Matsushita, the chorus demonstrated mastery of the wide variety of music chosen. "Dona nobis pacem" was set for 3 three-voice choirs – one on the stage and one each in the left and right balconies. Calling back and forth and across the sanctuary, the appeal for peace intensified to a grand and glorious climax. It was a very impressive start to a fine concert.

For the next selection Maestro [Allan Friedman](#) chose another poly-choral gem. "Lauda Jerusalem" is one of those charming and delightful pieces Antonio Vivaldi composed for the young women at the [Pio Ospedale della Pietà](#). The instrumentalists for this performance were Tasi Matthews and Matvey Lapin on first violin, Sarah Griffen and Kyle VanArsdalen on second violin, Petra Berényi and Simon Ertz playing viola; Virginia Hudson and Erica Leavell playing cello, and Robbie Link on bass. Leigh Denny was the organist and WVC accompanist, Deborah Hollis was harpsichordist. The choir, the instrumental ensemble and two soprano soloists (Rachel Spencer and Carli Webb) were divided into two performing groups.

The performance was a total delight; crisp and dynamically well-balanced by all under Friedman's confident leadership. The chorus, singing from memory, was superbly balanced with precise articulation. The instrumentalists were exceptional with dazzling musicality. The soloists were both outstanding, providing contrast and soaring enhancement of the overall sonic effectiveness of Vivaldi's skillful anthem. In short, it was an ovation performance.

The following selection was something quite different. "Curse Upon Iron" was composed by the Estonian Veljo Tormis, who died exactly one year ago on the date of this concert. Soloists were Meg Berreth, Catherine Garland, Virginia Byers Kraus, Jennie Vaughn, and Barrie Wallace. Tim Turkington was percussionist.

The piece is based on the Nordic folklore collected in the Kalevala. It is a brutal reminder that the things we pick up in life have potential to enhance or destroy. Iron can be forged into a plow, or a sword. Technology can be used to heal or destroy. There are a lot of words in this piece, and they were sung in English and were printed in the program. Beginning with a chant-like rhythm and a hypnotic drum beat the words began to pile up. Because of the growing complexity of the rhythm and choral cross patterns, the words became almost impossible to follow. They tumbled down like a landslide, like an avalanche. One felt a devastating loss of control until, at the end, there were three overwhelming bangs on the drum, signaling (perhaps) that it was now too late! I do not know how to assess the performance of this piece, which I have never heard before, except to say that it had a powerful impact, and I had to choke back tears at the end... It must have been a very fine performance!

Almost the opposite mood was represented in the next selection: Virgil Thomson's lovely setting of the 23rd Psalm, "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need." The first verse, in duet by Janet Huebner and Amie Tedeschi and doubled with violin and viola, was magical in its sweet tenderness. The second verse added more voices and instruments, and the third verse was full voiced with grand accompaniment. It was a beautiful performance. (However, I have an issue with the composer: The last line of Isaac Watts' gorgeous versification – "No more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home." – does not call for a big cadence, but for a reverent whispered expression of awe. But that's just me.)

"Song of the Universal," the piece that suggested the title of this concert, is the popular work of Norwegian Ola Gjeilo. The text, a poem by Walt Whitman, exalts human potential through love in accord with nature. The music is lush with flowery harmony and lilting melody. The chorus and orchestra were in the

EVENT INFORMATION

Chapel Hill -- (Sun., Jan. 21, 2018)

[Women's Voices Chorus: "Song of the Universal"](#)

Performed by WVC (Allan Friedman, artistic director); Deborah Hollis, accompanist
Adults \$17; Students \$7; Group rate available for parties of 10+ --
 University United Methodist Church ,
 (919) 307-6860;
 contact@womensvoiceschorus.org ,
<http://womensvoiceschorus.org> --
 3:00 PM

element with a beautiful performance.

"A Blessing of Cranes" began as a poem by Michael Dennis Browne. It is based on the experience of a young Japanese girl inflicted with radiation poisoning in 1945. A Japanese legend says that if you fold (origami) one thousand cranes, one wish you make will come true. The little girl did not make it, but the spirit of hopefulness in the future is captured beautifully in the poem and is enhanced in the music by the popular American choral composer, Abbie Betinis. Against a lilting and lovely choral setting, sung so affectively by WVC, the piano accompaniment performed by Hollis provided harmonic enrichment with arpeggios and block chords that gave this piece a tender and winsome acoustic.

It is one of Friedman's routines to ask his chorus to memorize one or two of the pieces programed for each concert. Of course in doing this, the singers can set aside the music folder; no page turning, no glancing up to let the conductor know you are watching. It makes for precise attacks at the beginning of phrases, clean cut-offs at the end. It makes for smooth crescendos and diminuendos and all together better ensemble performances.

One such piece on today's program was Gwyneth Walker's gorgeous setting of e.e. cummings' poem of gratitude and hope, "I Thank You God (for most this amazing day)." All of those positive issues mentioned above were true in the performance of this piece. Add to that, Hollis' marvelous accompaniment of Walker's brilliant, dramatic piano score, and it was an ideal musical experience to close an impressive concert.

For an encore we were treated to a reprise of the opening "Dona nobis pacem" with its impassioned appeal for peace. It was just as impressive the second time around.

Many musical friends who lingered after the concert agreed that this was the finest and most polished performances we have enjoyed by the Women's Voices Chorus under Friedman. We look forward to the future.



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