



CHORAL MUSIC REVIEW

Women's Voices Chorus Delivers Luxuriant Concert

By [Ken Hoover](#)

November 22, 2014 - Chapel Hill, NC:

The setting of the picturesque [Chapel in the Pines](#) provided a warm acoustic ambiance for the unique blend of [Women's Voices Chorus](#). It seems that each year under the capable leadership of [Allan Friedman](#) this ensemble achieves another level of ensemble precision and blend.

The program presented an interesting variety of styles and periods of music, beginning with a lively traditional African American spiritual, arranged by [Rosephayne Powell](#). "Keep Yo' Lamps" was an ideal set-up for the program theme: "Awakenings: Songs of New Birth & Origins" exploring birth, springtime, young love, and the rise of social movements. From the opening spiritual, the WVC Chamber Choir took us to renaissance Spain and the master composer Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611). His "Duo Seraphim" was richly blended, and its double choir effect was underscored by some remarkable altos on one side and superb sopranos on the other, singing the call of the angels from one side of the temple to the other.

Next came two contrasting settings of "O magnum mysterium," a motet describing the wonder of animals at the birth of Christ in the stable. The first was by the Slovenian renaissance master Jakob Handl (1550-91) sung by the full chorus in an eight-part double choir setting. The second setting was by the contemporary American composer [Guy Forbes](#), who teaches at Millikin University School of Music in Decatur, Illinois. His setting was in the renaissance spirit but with delicious modern harmonies and accomplished polyphonic scoring. At the end, this piece segues to a joyful imitative alleluia section; thus the mystery is infused with echoes of joy. Both of these works were sung with accomplished balance, meaningful phrasing, and solid intonation.

"The Moon of Wintertime," a poem by [Jesse Edgar Middleton](#), set to a traditional French/Canadian melody arranged for women's chorus by [George L. Mabry](#), was accompanied by [Nancy Whelan](#) at the piano. The soloist was Wendy Hua, whose sweet but small voice provided a special touch to this lovely piece.

As they used to say on Monty Python: "And now for something completely different." "[Geographical Fugue](#)" by the significant Austrian classical composer, Ernst Toch, was presented in a sort of sprechstimme technique, that is, speaking rhythmically without specified pitch. The text speaks of "Trinidad! and the big Mississippi and the town Honolulu and the Lake Titicaca, etc." The rhythmic patterns were spoken in overlapping imitative patterns as in a round or a fugue and with dynamics for a most interesting effect."

"The Little Babe," from Benjamin Britten's masterpiece *A Ceremony of Carols*, was sung with Whelan playing the harp part on the piano and the choir demonstrating fine rhythmical precision.

"Artsa Alinu," a traditional Israeli tune arranged by [Nina Gilbert](#), was a favorite dance song of Jewish Pioneers in Palestine. WVC captured the boldness and enthusiasm of the song beautifully.

The next two pieces drew text from the Biblical Song of Songs. The first one, "Nigra Sum" by the great Spanish Catalan cellist Pablo Casals, was sung in Latin. The accompaniment contains a gorgeous arpeggio ostinato played marvelously by Whelan. The chorus sang the luxurious melody with passion. The second, "Arise, My Love," by American composer [Joan Szymko](#), was sung in English. It too was a flowing, lyrical piece with a lush piano accompaniment.

"Awakening" is a short mystical mood piece by [Patricia Van Ness](#). It is given entirely on the syllable "lu" and, as sung by WVC, achieved an awesome ethereal journey of unspecified destination.

[Alice Walker](#), author of the novel *The Color Purple*, wrote the lyrics of the next piece, "They Were Women Then," which describes her mother's generation's physicality and determination. The musical setting was by [Judith Lang Zaimont](#), the recognized American composer, and the work was sung by the chamber choir, capturing the vigor of the lyrics.

Another piece from the suffragette struggle was "The March of the Women," with lyrics by [Cicely Hamilton](#) and music by [Ethel Smyth](#). It is a powerful and

EVENT INFORMATION

Chapel Hill -- (Sat., Nov. 22, 2014)

[Chapel in the Pines](#)
[Presbyterian Church, Women's](#)
[Voices Chorus: "Awakenings:](#)
[Songs of New Birth and](#)
[Origins"](#)

Performed by Women's Voices
 Chorus

Suggested \$10 donation -- Chapel in
the Pines Presbyterian Church , (917)
 414-2239 ,

<http://strobilusmusic.tumblr.com/>

-- 3:00 PM

driving expression of the boldness and strength of the exceptional women who fought for the right to vote.

And the finale piece on the program was the rhythmically jaunty "Never Sit Down!" based on a traditional American tune arranged by [Gwyneth Walker](#). Sung from memory – a practice encouraged by Friedman that enables all eyes on the conductor and a strong sense of ensemble as well as the opportunity to use the hands to enhance the rhythm with clapping.

This was a very fine concert with a well-thought-out eclectic program and high-quality choral singing. The audience expressed warm and enthusiastic appreciation. and as an encore Friedman led the ladies in [Alex Blake](#)'s emotionally overwhelming arrangement of the great African-American spiritual "Deep River." I get chills just writing about it and remembering it.

This concert will be repeated with additional selections at WVC's concert on January 25, 2015. Keep posted with CVNC's Arts Calendar.

Editor's Note; The Toch is rare enough – I am not sure it has ever been reviewed in CVNC – to refer readers to a [YouTube](#) version – alas, not by WVC, but nonetheless worth hearing.



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