



CHORAL MUSIC REVIEW

The Long Bright: Women's Voices Chorus Meditates on Struggle and Loss

By [Harrison Russin](#)

May 16, 2014 - Chapel Hill, NC:

Nearly everyone has been affected by cancer, but while this disease remains destructive, pernicious, and invidious, we react to it differently. Some people run marathons; [some treat it humorously through media campaigns](#); some wear pink during October; others commemorate the passing of a loved one with prayerful silence. The artistic response to disease and loss is particularly meaningful, because it is art's job to make the ordinary extraordinary. Poetry questions the way we use language; painting alters the way we see the world; music brings order to our constant rumble of daily noise.

On Friday, May 16, at the University of North Carolina's Hill Hall Auditorium, [Women's Voices Chorus](#) performed a powerful artistic meditation on the struggle and loss effected by cancer and disease. The program, produced in partnership with the [Duke Cancer Institute](#) and the [UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center](#), offered both pensive musical treatments and a celebration of the Chorus's 20th anniversary season. The resonant Hill Hall was pleasantly stuffy on a warm Friday night due to terrific audience turnout.

The program was presented in two unequal parts. The first consisted of four a cappella pieces, beginning simply with a round by [Abbie Betinis](#) that developed into a complex tangle of chords. [Joan Szymko](#)'s "Braided Light" was particularly beautiful, sung by a smaller chamber choir with Rachel Spencer as soloist. Spencer's solo was bright and strident compared to the accompanying choir, but well-placed, with curvy slides and a strong sense of melodic motion. Also heard in this group, "You Were Meant For This," a piece by [Elizabeth Alexander](#) setting poetry by Teresa Schreiber Worth, introduced a series of interesting percussive effects and ostinato voice parts.

During the five-minute break a 22-member orchestra assembled on stage to perform [Andrea Clearfield](#)'s *The Long Bright*. Clearfield's cantata was commissioned over ten years ago by writer David Wolman in memory of his wife Anni Baker, who died from breast cancer. Premiered in Philadelphia in 2004, the work received its Southeast U.S. premiere on Friday's concert. Clearfield composed the work for the formidable forces of [Orchestra 2001](#), a new music ensemble based out of Swarthmore College, and the Temple University Music Prep Children's Choir, along with soprano Hila Plitmann; the demands of her music can be seen just by looking at the percussion section, which calls for three musicians to play no fewer than thirty different instruments – *plus* a small handbell choir.

The Long Bright is a serious work by a serious composer, running over an hour in length, and the Women's Voices Chorus, under the direction of [Allan Friedman](#), performed the work with exquisite attention to detail. The work's leitmotif is a five-note refrain, set to the text "Do not fear the view." The many meanings of this refrain are explored throughout the cantata, which features text by Wolman. "Do not fear the view" applies to a family's experience of cancer, but also to the audience's experience of the piece. The fifth movement, "Dirt," is a remembrance of "...that place that once / Was / Ours / We had dirt / Like chocolate cake / Broken in our hands ..." These remembrances of simpler times, or at least simple-looking times through the lens of hindsight, go quickly, as all life does, until the narrator recalls the naked truth of the present: "I hate to remember this / I love to forget / Cancer." Clearfield's music slows down at this point, and the soloist comes to the realization that, even though time is constant, our recollection of it always seems variable. The good times never last long enough, and the bad times never seem to end. Wolman's poetry is a chilling glance into the world of cancer victims and treatments; the listener is exposed to the fearful reality of liver metastasis in "Mets," and continual, impressionistic glances at the sun: lingering sunsets, warming sun rays, the long bright of sunrise.

Susan Hellman offered a thoughtful, dramatic reading of the soprano solo. Her voice is at once operatic, yet clearly intelligible, providing the music and poetry with both direction and precision. Friedman had clear command of the complex music, and his direction of both the orchestra and the Chorus was studied and musical. This music is beyond the bounds usually sought by community choruses, but Women's Voices Chorus seemed to delight in the challenge of its complexity. Though they seemed to tire near the end of the piece, their dedication to new music and its beautiful performance is admirable. Clearfield, who was in the audience for the performance, can only be pleased with the impact her music has had on both the musicians and the audience.

EVENT INFORMATION

Chapel Hill -- (Fri., May. 16, 2014)

[Women's Voices Chorus: "The Long Bright"](#)

Adults \$15; Students \$5; Group rates available -- Hill Hall Auditorium , (919)923-8789; contact@womensvoiceschorus.org , <http://www.womensvoiceschorus.org> -- 8:00 PM



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