



CHORAL MUSIC REVIEW

## Women's Voices Chorus and Guest Artists Deliver Fascinating Music and Fine Singing

By [Ken Hoover](#)

April 24, 2016 - Durham, NC:

[Women's Voices Chorus](#) under the direction of [Allan Friedman](#) has, over the past several years, established a high standard of excellence in choral singing. Friedman has a knack for choosing audience-pleasing music in different styles and in a wide variety of languages. On this occasion in the inviting and very full sanctuary of [First Presbyterian Church](#) in downtown Durham, they presented a concert titled "The Womanly Song of God," suggested by the second number on the program which we will get to shortly.

The program opened with a suite of musical settings of the mystical works of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet, [Hâfez](#). With the style of Arabic music, composer [Abbie Betinis](#) (b.1980) has captured the feel of the poetry. Beginning with an introductory chant, beautifully sung by Chelsea Davis, the choir set a mystical mood; an added viola obbligato played by Petra Berenyi enhanced the ethereal feel of the music. Guest soloist, Dr. Amir Rezvani sang interspersing verses in authentic Farsi. Other brief solo passages were rendered by Meg Berreth, Shipra Patel, Leah Vallario, Carli Webb, Jennifer Weld, Ali Pflaumer and Mary Hoover. All represented the level of outstanding talent that has been attracted to the WVC experience.

The second piece on the program was "The Womanly Song of God," based on a poem by the twentieth-century Belgian-American poet Catherine de Vinck, and set to music by Libby Larsen. For each of their concerts, Friedman challenges the women to commit to memory one or two special pieces. So doing gives the director full eye contact with each of the choristers leading to a precise and confident rendition. This complex and challenging piece ends with summation: "I am a God of a thousand names: why cannot one of them be Woman singing?" It was a remarkable performance.

Franz Biebl's haunting "Ave Maria" was sung antiphonally with half the choir in the balcony and the main chorus in the front. The warm and rich harmonies and captivating melodies of this piece were sung beautifully. The solo incipits were sung by Laura Olson, Brit Kelly and Val Hanson.

The chamber choir sang a beautiful traditional Mexican melody arranged by Stephen Hatfield – "Las Amarillas."

Guest chorus, the Advanced Women's Chorus of [Northern High School](#) which is directed by WVC member Rachel Spencer, sang a most appealing rendition of "Kooowu" with both text and music by the Palestinian-American composer Maryann Khoury (b.1983). The caged bird longing for freedom in this song represents the multitude of Middle Eastern refugees enduring cruel circumstances. These young women with their fresh voices were able to capture the pathos and the hopeful longing most effectively.

The first half of the concert ended with a WVC favorite that has been programed before – "Sisters" from *My Girls*, No. 3 with poetry by Lucille Clifton and music by [Gwyneth Walker](#). This was one of those selections committed to memory by the WVC. They were joined by the high school choir that sang it with winsome gusto to the delight of the audience.

After a brief intermission the concert continued with three Hebrew selections beginning with the rollicking "Hal'luhu," a setting of Psalm 150 by [Benjie-Ellen Schiller](#). With rhythmic drum and guitar accompaniment, it was a charming celebration of creation and praise. Spencer was the outstanding soprano soloist.

"Eshet Khayil," verses from Proverbs set to music by [Mordecai Seter](#), began with a wonderful duet sung by Irina Bunnage and Jennie Vaughn. The verses praised the kindness, wisdom, and vigor of the capable wife.

Next Eleanor Epstein's arrangement of a Yedidiah Admon tune, "Mah Dodech Midod," praising the beauty of the beloved, was beautifully sung by the choir with lovely piano accompaniment played by Debra Hollis. (This piece was commissioned by WVC as a wedding gift for Friedman and his bride who were wed a year and a half ago. They became proud parents of their first-born son last week. This was the world premiere.)

The next two songs related events of the Passover, which coincided with this concert. The first song, "Jocheved," the mother of Moses, (you remember the story), put her baby in a basket and floated him down the Nile to the Pharos's palace to avoid his decree to slay the first-born of every Israelite household. In the poetry of Sandy Shanin and the music of Andrea Clearfield, Jocheved sings of her longing to nurse her beloved son. Ann Harrison was narrator and Lexie Hallman was soloist. "Amulet," (poem by Barbara Goldberg and music by [Judith Shatin](#)) was an a capella selection with delicious tight harmonies sung with

### EVENT INFORMATION

Durham -- ( Sun., Apr. 24, 2016 )

[Women's Voices Chorus: "The Womanly Song of God"](#)

Adults \$15; Students \$5 -- First

Presbyterian Church , (919)

307-6860;

[contact@womensvoiceschorus.org](mailto:contact@womensvoiceschorus.org) ,

<http://womensvoiceschorus.org> --

3:00 PM

care.

The last two pieces featured the combined choirs. "Miriam's Song / Mi Chamocha" by Debbie Friedman, is two songs combined as one celebrating dancing and rejoicing. The guitarist was guest artist Lexie Hallman and the soprano soloist with a clear and sweet voice was Itzel Castro from the high school women's chorus. The closing selection, "Stayed on Freedom," was Friedman's arrangement of a traditional spiritual conveying the exhilaration of freedom – for all.

For an encore the choirs sang the gorgeous anthem "Grace Before Sleep" – [Susan La Barr](#)'s setting of a poem by Sara Teasdale.

Congratulations to Women's Voices Chorus, to the Advanced Women's Chorus of Northern High School, and to director Friedman for delivering such interesting music and fine singing.



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