



Leave it to Lycan

by John W. Lambert

Sunday February 3 . For nine years, Mary Lycan's Chapel Hill-based Women's Voices Chorus has been doing for music written for and by women what Paul Conway's Raleigh-based Hillyer Community Chorus has been doing for obscure composers of both genders--finding it, reading it, and performing it. Over the years, Lycan's found some wonderful material that no one else performs here. In addition, she has enriched the literature by commissioning and performing (twice) a work by Katherine Dienes and on the side running a small publishing house (<http://trebleclefpress.com/>) by means of which she shares some of her best discoveries (or re-discoveries) with other choral people. Lycan presented a concert in the recently-renovated University United Methodist Church (where the organ no longer sits, sphinx-like, just behind the altar, but has instead been shifted off to the side, allowing for much better arrangement of singers on the semi-circle of risers that have always been there) demonstrated that Lycan has not begun to lose her magic touch--and that her 50-voice chorus continues to thrive. Indeed, the singing was, by and large, the best we've yet heard from this ensemble. It was quite a musical journey, when everything was said, sung and done.

The program was titled "In My Mother's House" and crafted to honor mothers: Christ's, in the first part, and mere mortals--including adoptive and stepmothers--in the second. It began with a nicely layered, a cappella Ave Maria by Joan Szymko (b.1957), of Portland, Oregon. The composer of the next work, a stunning seven-section Magnificat, is from Oregon, too, and--like Szymko is very much alive and kicking. Thanks to Women's Voices, we've heard music by Lana Walter (b.1948) on previous occasions. The first NC performance of her Magnificat (2000) revealed a richly varied work that sometimes suggests Orff at his most playful but for the most part moves serenely with the text. The soloists were sopranos Vicki Behrens and Angela Winter. Four "Hildegard Motets" were written for the Swedish church of its composer, Maria Löfberg (b.1968). The set consists of opening and closing choruses that bracket two solo numbers, given on this occasion by alto Janet Huebner and soprano Marilyn Grubbs; Julie Covach was the guest organist. The texts, logically, were by Hildegard of Bingen and are various antiphons--for dedications of churches, for "divine wisdom," and for the Holy Spirit. In the wake of (please note) three contemporary works (which were all totally and immediately accessible), John Dunstable's "Quam pulchra es" might have seemed, at first glance, out of place, but its text comes from the Song of Solomon and, in the words of the outstanding but uncredited program notes, "gives expression to devotion to the Virgin Mary in sensual, even carnal terms."

This was performed by the small Winter Ensemble of 18 or so voices. Poulenc's impressive *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* stemmed from his 1935 reaffirmation of faith, which occurred--the notes explained--in the wake of the death of a friend in a terrible auto accident. The music often suggests the composer's great *Gloria*, which must rank among the finest choral works of the 20th century, and the chorus delivered the five Litanies with breathtaking skill. Indeed, this score proved to be the highlight of the afternoon in artistic and technical respects, for it served as proof positive that this is a true virtuoso (or, if you prefer, virtuosa) ensemble. The steadiness of the sustained, exceedingly soft high notes in this music met or exceeded just about any singing by any women's chorus I have yet heard, live or on recordings.

After the customary audience sing-along, following which all present, including this one-time (boy) soprano, may claim to have sung with Women's Voices of Chapel Hill(!), the program concluded with lighter, generally shorter numbers. Like the best orchestra maestri, however, Lycan cut her singers no slack, and there was no noticeable slackness in the delivery of these pieces--each was polished, and if some pleased more than others, that fact is attributable to the composers or arrangers, rather than the performers or their leader. The Winter Ensemble began this section with an attractive Ladino folksong--"Par'o era estrellero" ("Pharaoh Was a Stargazer")--arranged by Eleanor Epstein. The afternoon's greatest curiosity came next--the wonderful and virtually unknown chorus "Encinctured with a Twine of Leaves" by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who based his highly inventive work on a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Despite soprano Aminda Baird's contributions, Steven Molloy's version of "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" left this writer cold, probably because it is too far removed from the more-or-less original version with which many readers are surely familiar. On the other hand, Edgar Letellier's "Moïse sur le Nil" ("Moses on the Nile") was a gem of considerable proportions. In places, it comes across as strongly related to parlor songs of days gone by, but that's understandable when you reflect on the fact that it was written a century after Victor Hugo's *Odes et Ballades* (1820), the source of the words. This was further graced by one of the afternoon's most impressive soloists, Emilie Edwards, who may have quite a future if she decides to pursue a career in music. (She clearly has other fish to fry at the moment, however: although she has only recently relocated here from Georgia and lives in Durham, she was crowned Miss Raleigh during the culmination of the annual scholarship pageant the night before this concert!)

Part two of the concert may have peaked with Letellier's little chorus but there was more on this Superbowl Sunday's compelling program, during which few people paused to check their watches. Katherine K. Davis' "Nancy Hanks" tells of Lincoln's mother in heart-wrenching terms; Julie Martin was the soloist. Zae Munn's "The Stove" begins "One day my mother took up a sledge hammer and pounded her kitchen stove into bits"; we heard this in 1996, courtesy of Lycan's Ladies, but the encore performance was most welcome and of course the text illuminates yet another aspect of life for many mamas. Shirley W. McRae's "Fair Warning" provides just that--and suggests that when she's an old woman, she'll dress as she jolly well pleases. The program ended with the work that gave it its

overall title, J. David Moore's gorgeous arrangement of Stuart Stott's "Music in my Mother's House," which evokes memories of wind chimes and music boxes. It was a great excursion, beautifully realized by the singers, pianist Deborah Coclans, and Women's Voices' quite extraordinary Mary Lycan, who is, coincidentally, a mother herself. Please note, conservative programmers, that almost all of the music was written or arranged in the 20th century and that no one in the large audience expired during the show. Instead, the applause was warm and protracted, as well it ought to have been.

Readers may hear Women's Voices again on Saturday, February 9, at 2:00 p.m., when the chorus appears during the NC Women's Choral Festival. Five other choirs are involved, and the venue is the Chapel of the Cross. And Women's Voices spring concert is planned for May 31. See our calendar closer to that date for complete details.

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