



Growth & Change for Women's Voices Chorus, for Real!

by John W. Lambert

January 27, 2007, Chapel Hill, NC: The theme of the latest program offered by [Women's Voices Chorus](#) was "Growth and Change," and that certainly hit the nail on the proverbial..., for the constantly-evolving, generally ever-improving 55-member choir came up with another outstanding and appealing mix of works in many styles for what was concurrently the final concert of its esteemed founding director, Mary Lycan. We've chronicled the growth of WVC over the years in *CVNC* and, earlier, in the regional papers from which our critics came. 'Twas 14 years ago, and Lycan sensed the need for a choir of adult women. She sleuthed the repertoire, commissioned new pieces and, generally speaking, gave voice for the first time, regionally and beyond, to a substantial body of work that her devoted audiences have come to revere almost as highly as she herself.

On this occasion there were some welcome reprises of works by composers whose names have dotted WVC programs over the years. (Speaking of programs, the printed one for this concert was, like all the others, a class act in and of itself – and of course it, too, was the work of Mary Lycan!) There were new works and old, sometimes mixed skillfully, ingeniously, together. The accompanist was Deborah Coclanis.

Things got underway with the shape-note hymn "Though Troubles Assail," rendered simply and elegantly. Sometimes simple things are best –and often simple things are tough. But in this case, the choir nailed it, and while walking, too!

A highlight of the evening was an exceptionally happy marriage of "O Adonai," a plainchant, with Christine Donkin's very recent Magnificat (which featured soprano soloist Virginia Byers Kraus). This new-ish work is in its own way every bit as stark and compelling as the ancient tune that preceded and followed it; in the sanctuary of University United Methodist Church there was at the conclusion of this group the sort of stunned silence that follows only the most exalted renderings of the very greatest art-music.

And on the heels of this was yet more wonder and delight – a choral version of Charles Ives' exquisite "Little star of Bethlehem," one of that master's most amazingly "straight" songs and one that invariably disarms its hearers.

The themes of peace and prayer continued with "O Salutaris Hostia," from Gounod's Mass No. 4 and William Byrd's "Visita quaesumus Dominie" ("Visit, we beseech Thee, O Lord"), the latter sung by the 18-voice Winter Ensemble, a subset

of WVC. Arthur Bliss was represented by a lovely a cappella setting of the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, featuring soprano Betty Bergstrand; this demonstrated in no uncertain terms the technical and artistic prowess of WVC under Lycan's deft leadership. And there was more of the same in two fine choruses arranged by Eleanor Epstein – Ps. XXIII, by Ben Zion Shenker, and the snappy little spiritual-like "And Moses hit the rock" by Yedidyah Admon. (Epstein was present and graciously acknowledged the applause that greeted her music.)

An audience sing-along of "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" (allowing even men to claim they sang with WVC!) led to a far-too-long collection of raffle tickets and presentation of various prizes... before what was clearly meant to be the evening's *pièce de résistance*. Alas, Amy Beach's Victorian cantata "The Chambered Nautilus," a substantial piece for chorus with two solo voices, text by Oliver Wendell Holmes, much repetition, and a surfeit of grandiosity was not a complete success because, in this instance, it was capped by a distressingly uneven performance from guest soprano Marilee Vana. Mezzo-soprano Tamsin Simmill sang admirably but neither her contributions nor the generally good work by the choir were sufficient to offset the finale, where those summoned "stately mansions" (to be inhabited after our "low-vaulted past") wobbled on shaky foundations, to be sure.

It was nonetheless a bit of an anticlimax to hear in the wake of the Beach work the English folksong "Strawberry Lane" (with soloists Rhonda Matteson, alto, and Lisa DiMaria, soprano). And while it represented a distinct change of pace, a percussion-supported Zulu wedding song ("Hamba Lulu"), nicely enough accompanied by the four-member Jewelsong drummers and shakers, bore little apparent relationship to anything that had gone before.

At the end, there were tributes and a presentation to Lycan, whose life has been for more than 14 years entwined with WVC and the small spin-off ensemble, Isabella. Next term, Sue T. Klausmeyer will fill in – the shoes Lycan leaves behind are immense! A search for a permanent replacement is already underway. As a long-time fan of Lycan and all her musical undertakings (including her church work), all I can say is I hope there's someone out there with half her passion and devotion to this literature. If so, WVC will have a secure future, indeed. For sure, the groundwork's been well done! Adieu Miss Mary – and thanks!

Edited/corrected 2/4/07.

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