



Women's Voices: Seasons of Her Life

by Marvin J. Ward

A large audience, with a preponderance of women, was present in University United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill on May 31 for this season's presentation by the 45-member Women's Voices Chorus directed by Mary Lycan. The music was organized around a four-seasons theme, beginning with summer, and opened with the anonymous medieval round "Sumer is icumen in" with harp accompaniment supplied by Emily Laurance. This was followed by Gershwin's "Summertime," a solo by soprano Angela Winter with Deborah Coclanis at the piano. Next came Thomas Weelkes' Renaissance madrigal "The Nightingale, the Organ of Delight" presented by the 19-voice Spring Ensemble. This was followed in turn by "Sansa Kroma," Felicia Sandler's arrangement of a West African playground song, featuring solo work by soprano Sally Molyneux and percussion backup by three members of the chorus in addition to the piano. The warm weather segment ended with Josef Rheinberger's setting of Psalm 84, *Wie lieblich sind Deine Wohnungen* (How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place), accompanied again by Laurance. This final pair made for an excellent contrast with the lovely vocal syllabic harmonies and syncopated rhythms of the African inspired work succeeded by the lyrical and mellifluous lines that flowed like honey, both accentuated by the different back-up instrumentations. A real delight!

Autumn was represented by a group of four works, all set to prose poems and with piano accompaniment, by two composers, the first three by Gwyneth Walker: "My Girls," "To My Girls," and "Sisters," all texts by Lucille Chilton. The first two were a cappella and the last featured solo work by soprano Virginia Byers Kraus with percussion backup consisting of hand-work: slapping on thighs, clapping, slapping each other's, again by four chorus members, while the full chorus snapped fingers. The fourth piece, "In Heaven It Is Always Autumn" by Imogen Holst (Gustav's daughter) to a text by John Donne, again featured the Spring Ensemble. It formed a serene contrast to its spirited predecessor.

Winter began with an audience sing-along of Gustav Holst's "In the Bleak Midwinter" using the hymnals in the pews to set the mood. Then came the evening's centerpiece: Elinor Remick Warren's "The Harp Weaver" in its original 1932 scoring for piano and harp of the Pulitzer Prize winning 30-stanza poem "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. (It was re-scored by the composer for orchestra in 1936.) It featured baritone soloist Gerald Whittington along with the chorus, which serves as narrator, sound effect, background color, and the voice of the mother as she weaves, Coclanis and

Laurance. The story is an old Celtic legend of a starving mother and son who have nothing left but her harp bearing a woman's head and a chair. On a cold December 24th night, he falls asleep and dreams she plays the harp and weaves clothes fit for a king but in his size when the harp magically becomes a loom. When he awakes, there is a pile of clothes beside her but she is dead, hands frozen to the harp's strings. The work is hauntingly beautiful and was beautifully performed.

Spring arrived with Libby Larsen's "Today, This Spring," the first song in a set of three under that title, to a prose poem by Janice Kines. Lee Hoiby's "Where the Music Comes From" to his own rhymed-couplet text (although the varied line length and shorter fourth line of each stanza keeps it from feeling singsong) and arranged by him for two-part treble chorus from the original baritone/piano version followed. It had a very forward thrust in its flowing melody and led to Gwyneth Walker's "I thank You God" whose music fit the text by e e cummings particularly well. The piano scores of both had a certain "New Age" music feel to them that made them especially pleasing. Then came Claude Debussy's "Salut printemps" with Laurance joining Coclanis again for yet another melodic number that had a Joseph Kosma feel to it. The evening closed with a humorous number, Stuart Hunt's arrangement of the old American folk song "The Sow Took the Measles," which was performed with appropriate slapstick imitative movements and gestures. Applause was deservedly loud and long!

Diction was excellent throughout in all the languages sung. And the fine, seemingly flawless singing was inspired, and often inspiring. The pleasure and joy of performing was visible on the faces of this clearly dedicated group. The approximately 90-minute intermission-less program was well organized to hold the audience's attention with both the variety of musical and poetic styles presented and the clever contrastive pairings as it moved rapidly and smoothly along, without pause even, except for the applause after each number. The audience clearly took great pleasure in the performance, but too much applause can destroy a mood. The addition of "Please hold your applause until the end of groups of songs." to the request to silence electronic devices at the head of the program (as does Fortuna, for example) might help the flow a bit.

The printed program contained a personnel list and introductory material about the chorus (including next year's concert dates: January 26 and May 9-mark your calendars now!-and programs), all the texts with English translations for those in a foreign tongue, and succinct notes about the composers and some of the works. Most of the poets were credited, with the exception of that for the Debussy (which was by Le Comte de Ségur), although a few notes for the unfamiliar ones would have been welcome. Missing also were bios for the accompanists. There were very few typos, and it was overall simple but attractive, and well laid-out, with no page turns in the middle of numbers. Bravo to their modest author who did not credit herself!