

Review: Songs of the City
by John Lambert

Spectator Magazine, February 21, 2001

The versatile and innovative Women's Voices Chorus presented another in what seems to be an endless series of delightful programs of mostly new works on the afternoon of Feb. 4. Mary Lycan has imagination and taste, too, so she almost invariably presents works of unusual merit that 99 percent or so of the attendees are unlikely to know (unless, of course, they happen to live with one of the choristers).

This program, dubbed "Songs of the City," turned out to have a surprisingly heavy first half. It began with a stunning performance of "Zion's Walls," a tune that's been turning up all over this season. As it happens, however, this wasn't one of the better-known settings but rather an arrangement by Glen Koponen of Copland's adaptation of John G. McCurry's "original" (and who's to say?) that was included in an 1855 edition of *Social Harp*. Randall Thompson's *Pueri Hebraeorum* fared every bit as well, and both served as graceful, gentle introductions to the afternoon's largest single work, Viktor Ullmann's arrangements (for *Frauenchor*) of Yiddish and Hebrew folksongs. If there are more poignant musical utterances, none come immediately to mind -- and of course the poignancy with which we view these pieces reflects, in part, the murder of the arranger at Auschwitz on Oct. 17, 1944. The outstanding soloists were Virginia Byers-Kraus and Angela Winter. In the wake of this group, Lasso's *Tragico tecti syrmate*, a lament for the destruction of a city, was just the thing, programmatically; the first half ended with "Lift Thine Eyes" (from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*), sung gloriously, and a real rarity, "The Song Of The Tree Of Life," from Vaughan Williams' opera *Pilgrim's Progress*. One would have to go to a whole slew of other people's concerts to amass as much unusual music as was heard on this occasion!

The second half was lighter. Lycan dislikes intermissions, so the customary sing-along served as a stretch break; 'twas "Jerusalem, My Happy Home." There followed a condensed version of Gershwin's "An American In Paris" by Maurice C. Whitney that allowed pianist (and WV accompanist) Deborah Coclanis to shine (and the singers to extend their stretch break...), after which came bracing readings of "Mood Indigo," "Shuffle Off To Buffalo," "Meet Me In St. Louis, Louis," and "Tango Dada," by various composers and/or arrangers. This portion's major work was the three-section "My Girls" by Gwyneth Walker, in which Lucille Clifton's poems are fetchingly set. "Twelve Gates Into The City" brought the program to a rousing close. The soloists in part two were Amy Sinderman, billed as the group's Goddess of Publicity (she does a nice job in that department!), Marilyn Grubbs, Leslie Mansfield, Annetta Streater and Heather Burnett. The afternoon's dash of testosterone was supplied by Phillip Long, who played castanets in the tango number, which was sung by the 17-voice "Winter Ensemble." Otherwise the 40 or so ladies were completely on their own, under Lycan's inspired and inspiring leadership. They must have felt empowered, for they sang grandly throughout.