



Women's Voices Chorus Premieres *Sparks of Divinity*

by John W. Lambert

May 1, 2010, Durham, NC: Duke University was flush with culture on May Day as [Women's Voices Chorus](#) premiered a remarkable work by Lana Walter in the Chapel while the Ciompi Quartet played new music by Chiayu Hsu in nearby Reynolds Theatre and, two miles east, the Duke University String School offered its spring program in Baldwin Auditorium.

The Chapel is lovely to see and been seen in, and [Allan Friedman](#), director of Women's Voices Chorus, has professional ties there that have enabled the 60-voice ensemble to begin appearing outside its nominal base in Chapel Hill. Director Friedman has clearly been a boon to the choir in other respects, too. He's enriched the group's repertoire with some of his own compositions while continuing its long-standing and innovative programming of contemporary music and music by women composers – often concurrently. That he works in the Chapel on a regular basis, and as the assistant to Rodney Wynkoop, the Director of Chapel Music, gives him an inside track in terms of the venue's challenging acoustics. As heard from close quarters on this occasion (from seats in the third row), Friedman has found the key to putting over music there with considerable success.

The program opened with Chesnokov's "O Gladsome Light," a lovely and most welcome alternate to the composer's ubiquitous "Salvation is Created." There followed an astonishingly beautiful "Magnificat" (with its familiar text from Luke) by Christine Donkin (b.1976) that, in retrospect, may have been the evening's artistic high-water mark. This short a cappella number featured mezzo-soprano soloist Erica Dunkle's clean articulation of the words while the ten-part(!) choir intoned, mostly pianissimo, pitches and vowels (per the program note by Friedman himself) drawn from the solo part. (The work was edited by WVC founding director Mary Lycan.) The result was somewhat akin to what one might imagine at evening prayer with the nuns in their own remote cloisters – a remarkable and haunting effect, to be sure.

The *Hildegard Motets*, with words by Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), set by Maria Löfberg (b.1968), brought WVC accompanist Debra Coclanis to the fore. The first and last of the numbers are for chorus while the middle two are for solo voices – Dunkle and soprano Kristen Blackman, respectively. These are serene pieces that featured outstanding singing from all participants – the choir is a top-flight ensemble with precise attacks and releases, superb phrasing and diction, and finely-shaded dynamics, and the solo singers were in all respects comparable. The concluding number features elaborate and compelling repetitions of "Alleluia."

Eleanor Daley (b.1955) was featured next with “The Gate of the Year,” based on King George VI’s Christmas message in 1939, here launched and concluded by soloist Blackman.

Sparks of Divinity is a three-section composition by Lana Walters (b.1948) that was commissioned by chorister Susan Brown in memory of her mother, Janie Perrin Stevens Brown, who succumbed to complications resulting from Alzheimer’s disease. The composer’s mother, too, was a victim of this scourge, the curse of old age that many view as worse than death. It’s the at-first selective loss of memory that is most painful to those who suffer the disease and of course their families; for reasons not yet clear but perhaps related to the depth of old, old imprints, music often provides sparks of recollections amid the fog. The texts – from the Bible, “I am not here” (attr. Mary Frye), and by Susan Brown – speak of greater – divine, indeed – sparks. They have been set with exceptional sensitivity by Walters, and the resulting composition is a powerful and moving tribute to the memory of Brown’s mom and, indirectly, the many, many others who have as a result of Alzheimer’s departed from us long before they have in fact left us.... Walters was recognized, and she in turn called Susan Brown forward to share the applause with her.

Russian and Hungarian choruses launched the second part of the program. Tchaikovsky’s “Little Golden Cloud” carried forward the impressions left by Walter’s composition. Two pieces by Kodály reminded us that he wrote a lot of music for women’s (girls’) voices that, because of the language, are virtually unknown in America. (Soloists in the Kodály were Lisa diMaria, Rebecca Santelli, and Carli Webb.) A work in Latin by György Orbán (b.1947), an Hungarian composer of Romanian birth, served as another reminder of the profusion of foreign tongues heard in this concert. (In the first of the Kodály pieces was a single instance of what sounded like a pitch sag – but it’s more than possible it was a combination of the language and the folk idiom.)

And there was still more as the chamber choir (22 singers who are also part of the larger ensemble) turned to the four-section *Lorca Suite* (in Spanish, of course) by Einojuhani Rautavaara (b.1928), with soloists Webb, Ashley Oskardmay, Tatjana Ambelius, and Erin Branch.

Last but hardly least there was *Songs of Radiance* by WVC director Friedman. This four-section score was composed for the 2009 NCMTA (NC Music Teachers Association) Conference. The work begins and ends with well-known, much admired words – Ben Johnson’s “Hymn to Diana” and the “Nunc Dimittis” (“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace”). In between come “The Breeze at Dawn” by Rumi (1207-73) and the “Hymn to Surya” from the *Rig Veda** – neither of which is common fare in reflective musical works written in North America nowadays. The resulting composition is remarkable for its musical and spiritual unity and for the splendor with which the four pieces illuminated the current artistic capabilities of the presenting artists. The full choir sang the first and last numbers, soprano Rachel Fitzsimmons and flutist Linda Metz (who doubles as an alto) essayed the Rumi section, and the chamber choir performed

the *Rig Veda* hymn.

There was a considerable uproar from the enthusiastic crowd, resulting in a single encore – an arrangement of René Clausen’s “Set me as a seal.”

It was quite an evening, courtesy of one of the great artistic gems of the Triangle.

*There are over 1,000 hymns in this collection (c.1200 - 900 B.C.), some of the best-known of which were set by Gustav Holst.

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