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CHORAL MUSIC REVIEW

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"There was Music..." - & lots of it - from Women's Voices Chorus

 By [John W. Lambert](#)

January 29, 2011 - Durham, NC:

The sanctuary of Durham's First Presbyterian Church was pleasantly filled for a late-afternoon concert by [Women's Voices Chorus](#), directed by Allan Friedman. This was the first of two presentations of this program, devoted to mothers, spiritual and otherwise; the repeat is to be in Chapel Hill on the afternoon of January 30, and admirers of great choral singing who are concurrently seeking to avoid the capital on NHL All-Star day would do well to make tracks to University United Methodist Church to hear it.

The program was titled "Almae Matres: Our Nourishing Mothers." The first half, devoted to Mary, was an extraordinary mini-survey of sacred music, ranging from "Sancta Maria" by Alfonso X, el Sabio (1221-84) to recent works with decidedly contemporary overtones that were nonetheless completely compatible with the much earlier pieces. That opening number was exhilarating, thanks in part to the contributions of four percussionists, but the entire half was at once astonishing - in terms of the purity, accuracy, and technical sophistication of the singing - and breathtaking - in terms of the beauty and emotional power of the music. The pieces included an anonymous manuscript from Montserrat ("Mariam matrem" - "Exalt Mary"), a lovely, flowing hymn by Palestrina, litanies by Isabella Leonarda and Poulenc, and a motet by Duruflé. The electronic harpsichord used in the Leonarda was off-putting, but Deborah Coclanis' keyboard work was discrete (and elsewhere she excelled); the work, one of the afternoon's most substantial compositions, was enhanced by fine singing from soloists Katie Shrieves, Franz Rokoske, Janet Buehler, and Janet Huebner. The text is substantial, too, covering a lot of ground. It's a further tribute to this chorus that the diction was virtually flawless all afternoon, diminishing the need for the texts given in the program (alongside translations, of course). Poulenc's *Litany* was splendidly accompanied by organist Kathy Parkins; this music suggests the great Poulenc *Gloria* that was, in 1936, still to come. The Duruflé was sung by the 20-or-so voices of the chamber choir, roughly a third of the larger group; it was so delicate one thought it must have been realized by far fewer vocalists. Those contemporary pieces were Paula Foley Tillen's deeply reverential "Ave Maria" and an arrangement by Marc Shaiman of "Hail Holy Queen" (ex *Sister Act*), delivered with great enthusiasm by soloist Jillian Bauman and the chorus.

After intermission, the music was somewhat lighter, although the original versions of three of Brahms' *Marienlieder* kept the first part in a serious vein, despite some folk-like melodies. The opener was Ysaye M. Barnwell's heartwarming "On Children" (which served as the program's most welcome encore). There were numbers in Welsh ("Suo Gân," with a solo by Rachel FitzSimons) and Yiddish ("Yome, Yome"), traditional and familiar American works, and two African pieces. Those American works featured one of the afternoon's most impressive numbers, "Music in My Mother's House," the chamber choir in "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child," and soloist Mary Hoover leading the way for "Poor Wayfaring Stranger"; these familiar pieces were all given in exceptional settings. Soloist Jen Gibson did the honors in "Sansa Kroma" (from Ghana) and an arrangement of a Nigerian piece - "O-re-mi" - brought back the percussionists for a rousing finale.

Friedman is a wonderful conductor, one whose effective leadership was constantly evident during this concert. One must note, too, the many languages sung on this occasion - that alone was a remarkable tour de force for the group!

EVENT INFORMATION

Durham -- (Sat., Jan. 29, 2011)

[Women's Voices Chorus:](#)
["Almae Matres: Our Nourishing Mothers"](#)

Performed by Women's Voices Chorus, Allan Friedman, director
 \$15, students \$5, group rates available. -- First Presbyterian Church , 919/684-3855 ,
<http://www.womensvoiceschorus.org>
 -- 4:00 PM

Chapel Hill -- (Sun., Jan. 30, 2011)

[Women's Voices Chorus:](#)
["Almae Matres: Our Nourishing Mothers"](#)

Performed by Women's Voices Chorus, Allan Friedman, director
 \$15, students \$5, group rates available. -- University United Methodist Church , 919/684-3855 ,
<http://www.womensvoiceschorus.org>
 -- 3:00 PM

WVC is one of our regional pioneers in the use of high-tech: one may purchase CDs of their concerts either in person or online.

The ensemble returns to Duke Chapel on May 1 with "themes of grief, loss, rebirth, and joy." Mark the calendar - now!

And for details of the Chapel Hill performance on 1/30, see the Related Events box to the right.

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 Tues, July 7-Thur, July 9 at 8pm
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