



Things That Fly – Angels, Birds and Witches

by Ken Hoover

Women's Voices Chorus, under the leadership of the imaginative and inimitable Mary Lycan, and accompanied by Deborah Coclans, soared high and low for the audience at their spring concert at University United Methodist Church on Friday, May 5. Lycan, with her eye for theme concerts, put together a widely varied and fascinating program drawing on textual references to angels, birds, witches, chariots, hope, and the human spirit. Beginning with a plainchant, "Alleluia, Angelus Domini descendit" ("Alleluia. The angel of the Lord descended"), the selections came closer to earth and ended with a modestly dramatized version of the witches scene from act IV of *Macbeth*.

The first highlight was Felix Mendelssohn's motet for women's choir and organ (the third of three he wrote), "Surrexit Pastor bonus," Op. 39, No. 3. Solos and ensemble passages by Joan Troy, Mary Hoover*, Penny Ward, and Janet Huebner were superbly rendered; Lycan continues to attract and cultivate the fine qualities of the female voice. Susan Moeser was the organist. The choir blend was beautifully accomplished, though the third verse seemed to sag a bit.

"The Mater Admirabilis Chapel" is a piece I have never heard before, nor was I aware of its Canadian composer, Violet Archer (1913-2000). Immediately on hearing this music I wished I had heard it before and hope to hear it again. The text by Alberta Bass, a Cherokee, tells of the "pigeons on the roof of the little chapel that belongs to the Mother of God." It is suggested in the program notes that this impressive poetry could well be a plea for traditional Christianity, personified by the statue of the Virgin Mary inside the chapel, to embrace the nature-based spirituality of the Native American. The poet invites the Virgin to come out and see the pigeons "pirouette for you." The last line still haunts me: "they dance that cannot pray." Archer's music is ethereal, yet earthy, simple and straightforward yet with wonderfully enriched harmonies. A clarinet solo accompanied the choir; it was played beautifully by Jennifer Cox Bell, and it was just the right touch to top off this extraordinary choral gem.

A double choir motet by Thomas Luis de Victoria, "Duo Seraphim" ("Two Angels"), was sung by the "Spring Ensemble" a sub group of the Women's Voices Chorus that stays after regular rehearsals are over to prepare a special selection each spring. Gwyneth Walker's "So Many Angels" was a little irreverent, a little jazzy, and a lot of fun.

Setting the poetry of Emily Dickinson to music must be harder than trying to set the music of a late Beethoven quartet to poetry, even for such an accomplished

composer as Emma Lou Diemer. Five poems under the title *Hope is the Thing* jerk, jump, hop, and splash in Diemer's setting, which seems to attempt to provide musical descriptiveness to Dickinson's economical flowing verse. I didn't care for it, but some friends with me did. So there you have it! You should have been there and heard it for yourself.

It was a joy to hear "Los Bilbilicos" ("The Nightingales"), a Sephardic delight that blends Jewish and Spanish music. This unique cultural treasure had a touch of klezmer from Bell's clarinet, the fire of flamenco from soloists Darcy Wold and Diane Wold, and the heart of Jewry from the chorus.

After a couple of traditional American songs that were pure fun, the program closed with John E. Govedas' "Mulligatawny Macbeth," a musical and somewhat dramatized arrangement of the witches scene from Shakespeare's melodrama. This is another of those pieces that only Lycan, with her sharp eye, attuned ear, and devotion to music for women's voices, could find. Full of whimsy and imaginative scoring, and performed with energetic enthusiasm, it was really special. The witches were played by Joan Holland, Judy Moore, and Roberta Yule Owen.

Lycan ended her program notes (always informative and helpful) with this sentence: "Women's and treble choirs sing so much angel music, and women are generally socialized to be so nice, that we are grateful to Mr. Govedas for this opportunity to be bad girls." Veehry interesting!

And good night, Lucy..., uh, Mary!

*Mary Hoover is the spouse of the reviewer.

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