



Women's Voices Chorus in Duke Chapel – A Special Treat

by Ken Hoover

January 13, 2008, Durham, NC: This was an afternoon of “firsts” for the [Women’s Voices Chorus](#): their first full concert in Duke Chapel; their first concert under their new permanent director, Allan Friedman; and the premiere of “Herself a Rose,” based on a Christina Rossetti poem about the Virgin Mary and composed by Eleanor Daley. This piece was commissioned by the chorus to honor their Founding Director, Mary Lycan, who retired last year. Lycan willed, guided, and shaped the character of this group for fourteen years. There is no doubt the group will grow and reach new pinnacles under the direction of Friedman, but the spirit of Lycan will linger as the fragrance of a rose, and indeed it should. So many treasured and inimitable memories come to mind as we think back over the years — a veritable catalogue of the rare, unusual, new, and old musical treats we owe to Lycan’s untiring creativity and relentless pursuit of music for the matchless sound of Women’s Voices Chorus.

Friedman earned his BA in music from Duke, an MA in music from UNC, and a DMA in choral conducting from Boston University. He is the Assistant Conductor/Administrative Coordinator of Duke Chapel Music. This program was carefully chosen to take advantage of the ambience and acoustics of Duke University Chapel, opening with three settings of Magnificat (My soul doth magnify the Lord). The first was by Niccolò Porpora, an early 18th-century Italian composer who was a significant contributor to the new art form of opera. This setting was accompanied by Ensemble Pro Cantores (consisting of Isabella Spiewak and Yang Xi, violins, Meredith Hawley, viola, Nathan Leyland, cello, and Robbie Link, bass) and featured guest soprano Kristen Blackman and alto Erica Dunkle. It is a delightful, tuneful baroque gem that set a perfect mood for the first half of the concert.

The Magnificat, a renaissance glory by the 15th-century Guillaume Dufay, was sung by the Chamber Choir *a cappella*. The solo sections, sung exquisitely by Blackman and Dunkle, contrasted exquisitely, and the sustained quality of the tapestry was extravagant. The third Magnificat was Lana Walter’s 2000 setting, capturing, in 20th-century terms, the spirit and meaning of the beautiful poem St. Luke attributes to Mary as her expression of wonder and joy. The soloists in this selection were Val Huysentruyt and Roberta Yule Owen.

The 15th century carol “There Is No Rose,” a lovely song, was performed by the Chamber Choir before the premiere of Eleanor Daley’s “Herself a Rose, Who Bore the Rose.” The Rossetti poem is set to warm and lush harmonies in a repetitive musical structure enriching the four verses of the poem. It was a

beautiful and fitting honor for Women's Voices' unique and exceptional founder.

The second half of the concert began with Benjamin Britten's exquisite *A Ceremony of Carols*, with Blackman and Dunkle doing the solos and Anita Burroughs-Price playing harp. This is music one never tires of hearing. It is always fresh, special and satisfying. The text, taken from medieval and early renaissance carols mostly in Chaucerian Old English, is a challenge for the chorus to learn and, in some verses, to enunciate. The work was written for boys choir, and some women miss the charm of the piece with too much vibrato and too much learned style. Women's Voices Chorus, the soloists, and Burroughs-Price did it just, right capturing the simple lullaby-like wonder of this marvelous piece.

Madrigals by Thomas Morley and William Byrd followed the Britten, then two theatre pieces by Henry Purcell with figured bass and WVC accompanist Deborah Coclanis playing the harpsichord. The closing two pieces were of the more relaxed and pop variety. "Oh, Sing of the King Who Was Tall and Brown," a Langston Hughes poem set to music in a bluesy manner by Margaret Bonds, was a special treat. Coclanis was at the piano and Link, on double bass. The closing traditional Spiritual arranged by Undine Smith Moore, "A Christmas Alleluia," gave us the pleasure of hearing Betty Bergstrand's youthful pure soprano voice. (For those of you who do not already know, she will celebrate her 82nd birthday in May – she won't mind my telling you!) For an encore, Friedman chose Jonathan D. Greene's "Dormi, Jesu!" ("The Virgin's Cradle Hymn"), a deliciously harmonized and lovely carol.

This program was like finding a Christmas package, stuck up in the back of the closet and forgotten until now, thus being a sweet surprise and more special than it could have been among the abundance of December. Women's Voices Chorus showed signs of brilliance and finesse and left us with eagerness for their Spring Concert, "Songs of Innocence and Dreams" coming in May.

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