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CHORAL MUSIC REVIEW

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Women's Voices Chorus Has Arrived

By [Ken Hoover](#)

May 1, 2011 - Durham, NC:

May Day at Duke Chapel; [Women's Voices Chorus](#); orchestral ensemble, accompanist Deborah Coclanis; soloists from the choir; add Artistic Director Allan Friedman and you have all the ingredients for an outstanding Sunday afternoon concert and indeed it was. Friedman's well-chosen variety of music from baroque to contemporary from different corners of the world made superb use of the ambience of the Chapel. The title/theme of the concert was "Return to Joy."

The opening selection was Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's setting of the 13th century Latin hymn describing Mary's vigil at the cross, *Stabat Mater*. It was composed in 1736 to replace the setting by Alessandro Scarlatti which was perceived as old fashioned, though composed just nine years earlier. Pergolesi grouped the twenty verses of the hymn in twelve sections. The opening movement demonstrates the composer's mastery of the baroque style of suspensions over a moving base. It produces a rich flowing line of music with absolutely delicious dissonances and is the ideal vehicle for expressing Mary's sorrow at the cross.

Women's Voices Chorus was at their peak in this performance. The dynamic conductor had his sixty-some charges well prepared and led them with infectious confidence and enthusiasm. All worked together in balance and continuity. The soloists did an outstanding job and I will risk making special mention of one. Rachel FitzSimons was superb on two verses: the deeply moving "Videt suum dulcem natum" (She saw her sweet son dying desolate...) and the more technically demanding and dramatic "Fac ut portum Christi mortem" (Make me bear the death of Christ). The orchestra was sensitively balanced and dynamically supportive throughout. This was a most gratifying and inspiring performance.

The evening of this concert marks the beginning of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day.) In commemoration and support of this human task – lest we forget – WVC sang for us *Cradle of Fire* – a setting of five Holocaust songs arranged by Michael Isaacson. Through the emotional power of music we see with the eyes of those who saw their village burned, saw family and friends hauled off never to return, witnessed a cradle being burned, felt defiance and were sustained by a faith that makes even survival victorious. The music including solo passages sung by Lindsey Hayek was moving, sad, tender, beautiful and powerful.

After intermission, the chorus confronted the audience with a jaw-dropping piece by Minnesota based composer Abbie Betinis. *From Behind the Caravan: Songs of Hâfez* consists of four poems by the 14th century Persian poet. They are mystical in character with metaphors of transience and humanity. When I read these poems I am not sure of my intellectual understanding of the references, but I know for certain that something of significance has transpired in my soul. The music, touched with rhythm percussion and solo cello enhancing the voices of women singing, was equally mystical and moving, especially the soloists who belted out the lines full-voiced as one calling the time of prayer from the Minarets of Baghdad. My favorite of the poems was the one titled "suffer no grief" and ends with this line in English translation: "O heart, despairing heart, O! O! Suffer no grief. There is no road that has no end."

Dr. Amir Rezvani, president of the Persian Art Center in North Carolina, coached the choir in the pronunciation of the 14th century Farsi language and also discussed the poetry of Hâfez in a pre-concert talk in the Chapel.

The closing three selections, though shorter in scope continued the eclectic and universal creativity already described. University of Virginia Professor of

EVENT INFORMATION

Durham -- (Sun., May. 1, 2011)

[Women's Voices Chorus:](#)

["Return to Joy"](#)

Performed by Women's Voices Chorus, Allan Friedman, director, with string orchestra

\$15, students \$5, group rates available. -- Duke University Chapel, 919/684-3855,

<http://www.womensvoiceschorus.org>

-- 4:00 PM

Composition Judith Shatin composed "Amulet" in 2003 with revisions in 2007. It is a setting of a poem by Maryland poet, Barbara Goldberg. The poem alludes to Passover and lays out a plea to escape from the evils of greed and envy. The WVC Chamber Choir sang this richly harmonized and abundantly meaningful piece of music with passion.

"Return to Joy" by Australian composer Sarah Hopkins, blends European and Aboriginal styles of music in a unique sound experience. Chords of a crystalline quality establish the background out of which two Aboriginal chants take flight, a rhythmic dance of joy and a more earthy chant. The two chants react and interact with each other and ultimately blend in a dynamic expression of life. It was beautifully sung by the full choir.

The final selection on the program was Gwyneth Walker's setting of e.e.cummings well-known "I thank You God for most this amazing day." With arpeggio chords from the piano played by Coclanis, the chorus gave it their all as they had all afternoon. It was a glorious conclusion to a very fine concert.

With this concert it seems to me that Women's Voices Chorus has fully arrived. Conceived, brought into being and nurtured with a commitment that continues by the inimitable Mary Lycan and now nurtured to maturity by the effervescent Allan Friedman, this is one of those concerts you want to put on your "don't miss" list from now on.

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A rectangular advertisement with a blue and white background. It features the text "Eiko" in red, "Tues, July 7-Sun, July 12 at 7pm @ Cordoba Center for the Arts", "Company Wang Ramirez" in blue, "Tues, July 7-Thur, July 9 at 8pm @ Reynolds Industries Theater", "Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company" in red, "Fri, July 10 at 8pm", "Sat, July 11 at 7pm", and "@ Durham Performing Arts Center".

