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CHORAL MUSIC, MUSIC, VOCAL MUSIC REVIEW

Women's Voices Chorus Create Otherworldly Sounds in "Music of the Spheres" Concert

By [Maggie Pate](#)

January 21, 2023 - Chapel Hill, NC:

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, [Women's Voices Chorus of Chapel Hill](#) came together to share with community and family their thoughtful and inspired program, "Songs of the Celestial Spheres." Artistic director [Laura Sam](#) and the community of 48 voices entered the stage donning their signature scarves of aqua, blues and greens along with face masks. I noted that there were plenty of masks at the Will Call table for those wanting to wear them, and notably there was an older audience that deserves the right to choose to protect themselves, as does the volunteer choir, now in its 30th year with many of the founding members still present.

Programming centered around choral repertoire inspired by the sun, moon, and stars from varied eras, regions of the world, and musical styles. In just under an hour, the choir performed 12 pieces, 9 of which were by living composers! The program notes were thorough and attractively designed.

Opening with the dynamic "Moon Goddess" ([Jocelyn Hagen](#)), the choristers were accompanied by auxiliary percussion. Immediately, one could appreciate the warm but youthful tone of the choir and the fine diction in spite of the masking.

Gustav Holst, widely known for his interest in all things planetary, having written the great symphonic work *The Planets*, was a wise choice for this concert. From *Two Eastern Pictures II*, "Summer" featured unusual and mysterious chordal structures and rhythms. With text translated from Sanskrit and the harmonic style based on a Hindustani Raag, the choir displayed ease in this otherworldly offering and it was beautiful.

"Bright Morning Stars" (arranged by North Carolina's very own [Jay Althouse](#)) featured soloists Brystanna Kaufman, Anne Menkens, and Jasmine Trinks-Reese. With its hymn-like simplicity, this Kentucky folk tune was so moving that the audience let out a collective sigh at the end.

Accompanist [Deborah Hollis](#) shined on the ethereal "The Dawn is not Distant" (Donkin), as did soloist Jennifer Canada. The choir's *pianissimos* were especially impressive. Next came a stirring *a cappella* work by [Josu Elberdin](#) in Basque, "Izar ederrak." Sam's gestures were clear and emotive.

The traditional Spiritual "My Lord, What a Morning" (arr. [J. David Moore](#)) featured soloist Kinley Russell. This setting began with very contemporary harmonic structures proving difficult to keep in tune and balance, but things fell together as the verses started. And I learned something new from the great program notes: this Spiritual was actually written in the North by free African Americans!

"Song to the Moon" ([Z. Randall Stroope](#)) takes its text from the libretto to Dvorak's *Rusalka*. The setting is quite poignant with beautiful sweeping lines. This choir always shows great attention to dynamics.

A set of three songs of an even more "global" nature followed: "Par'o Era Estrellero" (arr. [Eleanor Epstein](#)) has traditional Turkish text set to the Phrygian scale, also known as the Jewish scale. This hypnotic soundscape was finely executed by the choir. You could tell they really loved the piece.

"Lakutshon 'Illanga," with text in Xhosa by Miriam Makeba and arranged by former WVC artistic director [Allan Friedman](#), was beautifully expressive and sung with deep emotion by the choir.

EVENT INFORMATION

Chapel Hill -- (Sat., Jan. 21, 2023)

[Women's Voices Chorus:](#)
["Songs of Celestial Spheres"](#)
University United Methodist Church ,
<https://womens-voices-chorus.square.site/product/january-2023-songs-of-celestial-spheres-/37?cs=true&cst=custom> -
- 3:00 PM

Yet another challenging language followed with a traditional Latvian folk text, "Mēnestinis Nakti Brauca" (The Moon Rode at Night) by Laura Jēkabsone, founder and leader of the group [Latvian Voices](#). The WVC sang this fun, free, song of young love with great exuberance and a really nice blend. The audience fully enjoyed it!

To end the afternoon, the choir turned to some crowd-pleasing, lighter American tunes: a swinging arrangement of "I Got the Sun in the Morning" (Berlin/arr. Shaw) from *Annie Get Your Gun*. Soloist Rah Bickley opened the number up with a fine solo and great acting. The closer was "When You Wish Upon a Star" from the old Hollywood film *Pinocchio*. With an unusually lush harmonic arrangement by Pete King, this song sent the audience out on a bright and cheerful note.

WVC took us through the full range of emotions with this fine programming. The choir produced a youthful sound throughout with very healthy singing. The importance of the Women's Voices Chorus as both an outlet for fine community choral singing and companionship, as well as the opportunity for choral music lovers to come together and hear interesting compositions is unquestionable, and we are all very fortunate to have these dedicated musicians in our midst. Especially appreciated is Sam's dedication to supporting living composers and programming music of authenticity. Kudos to all of the fine singers and players. Brava to Maestra Sam!

WVC will be holding their Spring Concert: [My Soul is Awakened](#) on Sunday, April 30.



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