



March 22, 2009

Choral icon's work part of 2 shows

By Janelle Gelfand
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Alice Parker is one of America's icons of choral music. A conductor, composer and most famously, an arranger who worked closely with Robert Shaw, Parker, 83, continues to travel the country to spread the gospel of American hymns and folk songs.

"When people say that music is going to the dogs, I say, that's what we hear about. But there's a huge amount of preserving the tradition that's going on," says Parker by phone from her home in Hawley, a small town in western Massachusetts.

In fact, Parker's lifelong passion has been to "ponder the unanswerable question of what is it that makes music last."

Parker is in town for two performances of her "Kentucky Psalms" by the Vocal Arts Ensemble and Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra, today in Memorial Hall and Anderson Center.

Parker had planned to be a fulltime composer, but her professors at Smith College insisted she write only in the atonal, 12-tone style favored by mid-century academics.

"I decided I was born in the wrong century and I could not get myself around that manner of composition," Parker says. "I couldn't be a composer, so choral conductor was the next step."

In a stroke of luck, she ended up studying choral conducting under Shaw at the Juilliard School in New York, just as he was launching his Robert Shaw Chorale, which grew to prominence in the 1950s and '60s. Learning of her composition background, he asked her to arrange hymns, spirituals and folk songs for a series of recordings by the Chorale for RCA.

For Parker, learning to set the familiar tunes became a life-changing moment.

"I had learned in college not to value the songs I'd love when I was little," she says. "I discovered in working with him that these tunes I had loved were wonderful songs. Some of them were extremely lightweight, but they persist. That was a huge lesson. What are the qualities of a melody that last for a generation - or two, three and four generations?"

"Kentucky Psalms," a commission from a church in Danville, Ky., is a cantata based on text and tunes from "Kentucky Harmony," a frontier hymnal of 1816.

She visited Danville to soak in Kentucky's frontier history as a gateway to the West, a place where Daniel Boone was a local hero. The settlers brought their music - hymns that sounded like English jigs and melancholy "lonesome tunes," she says.

"You find traces in these melodies of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, and these wonderful texts of a wide-open religious view, where there is heaven, hell, sin and virtue, Psalms and Bible stories."

She planned to write a suite in four movements, using hymns from "Kentucky Harmony." But she was stumped by the finale. The hymnal lacked what she wanted: Something "bouncy, like a Gilbert and Sullivan tune." She settled on a melody from another songbook, without Kentucky ties.

The night before the premiere, she was thumbing through old songbooks owned by her Danville hosts, called "The Kentucky Harmonist."

"I opened up one, and right in that book was that tune that I had used. It just felt like a blessing. I felt I was really on the right track," she says.

Parker, who wrote her first piece at age 8 and later composed music for her high school orchestra, did become a composer, too. She has written four operas - "what I call backyard operas, because they'll never be done at the Metropolitan Opera," song cycles, chamber music and 50 cantatas similar to her "Kentucky Psalms."

She has set up her own publishing company and has her own recording ensemble.

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

What: Folk Music Festival, Vocal Arts Ensemble and the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra, Earl Rivers, guest conductor

Performances: 2 p.m., Memorial Hall, Over-the-Rhine; and 7:30 p.m., Anderson Center, Anderson Township

Preconcert "Tune-Up": Composer Alice Parker speaks at 1:15 p.m., Memorial Hall.

Tickets: \$15 to \$25; Children up to 18 free with paying adult. 513-723-1182, www.cocincinnati.org
