

Vocal performance rich, ambitious

Concert review

By Janelle Gelfand • jgelfand@enquirer.com • March 23, 2009

Even before the economic downturn, the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra and Vocal Arts Ensemble came together for joint projects. That spirit of collaboration is even more important now, but their concert on Sunday in Memorial Hall confirmed that it's a good idea artistically, too.

Earl Rivers, director emeritus of the Vocal Arts Ensemble, was guest conductor for the choral program on a folk music theme, and Memorial Hall's small stage barely held the orchestra, with choristers across the back. The ambitious program included songs of Americana, Chinese folk tunes and the Pastoral "Lie strewn the white flocks" by Arthur Bliss, which concluded the afternoon.

Rivers opened with Ralph Vaughan Williams' lush "Serenade to Music," with text from a moonlit scene in Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice." The orchestral score was radiant, colored by piano arpeggios (Christina Haan) and a soaring melody for violinist Sujean Kim. The chorus captured the serene beauty of Shakespeare's evocative words with refined expression and beautiful blend.

Chen Yi's charming settings of Chinese Folk Songs were sung in Chinese. The songs, from eight Chinese provinces, were bright and imaginative, and the singers provided imitations of percussion instruments and a mountain train. Vocal soloists included the arresting sound of the countertenor (Michael Wisdom) and the fine soprano Debra Van Engen, in songs from Yunnan Province.

Composer Alice Parker, 83, introduced her own cantata, "Kentucky Psalms," a setting for singers, strings and solo flute of hymns from pioneer hymnals. Besides documenting these early American melodies, Parker's superbly crafted and inventive settings beautifully captured the varied moods of each hymn.

"Zion," a grand, bold setting, and the final "Washington" were joyously sung, and Rivers kept imitative textures clear. "Vergennes," a lament, had a poignant, emotional quality that carried over into "Amanda," a soulful meditation on death. The choral sound was rich-toned and flowing, and Susan Magg's flute added beauty to the atmosphere.

The program's second half opened with the premiere of "Three American Folk Hymns" by American composer William Hawley, whose sources included a Cincinnati hymnal. The full-bodied choral textures outweighed the orchestra, and I wished for more dynamic variation in these attractive settings.

Bliss' "Pastoral" concluded the day in the world of shepherds, nymphs and fauns. Rivers led with warmth and the chorus sang expressively, although the singers' powerful sound in the tricky Memorial Hall acoustic tended to overwhelm the orchestra.

Its riches were many. Highlights included a languid flute solo (Magg), the evocative "water nymphs" music featuring the women of the chorus, and a beautifully phrased "Pigeon Song" by mezzo-soprano Andria Helm, a student at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music.

The audience of 450 approved enthusiastically, and a second concert Sunday evening at Anderson Center was sold out.