

Folk Music, "Sweet Harmony" Enrich Vocal Arts Ensemble/Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra Collaboration

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Alice Parker

Shakespeare in the moonlight, a Chinese love song, hymns of pioneer America. All brought up to date by contemporary and 20th-century composers. It would have been hard to find a more satisfying concert than the one enjoyed by a full house Sunday evening (March 22) at Anderson Center in Anderson Township.

(A slightly longer program was performed earlier in the day in Memorial Hall downtown.)

It was "Folk Music Festival I," the first of two concerts by the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra celebrating folk music. For this one ("Folk Music Festival II" is April 19 at Memorial Hall), they were joined by the Vocal Arts Ensemble. On the podium was VAE music director emeritus Earl Rivers.

The VAE/CCO collaboration is a much-anticipated annual event. Initiated by former CCO music director Gerhard Samuel during the 1980s and sporadic thereafter, it was made annual by Rivers (who retired from the ensemble last season after a stellar 20 years) and Mischa Santora, CCO music director since 2000.

Making the occasion even more special, two of the composers represented on the program were present to hear their music performed, Alice Parker and William Hawley.

With a core of 24 professional singers, the VAE, now in its 30th season, has been noted for introducing new American music. Such was the case Sunday with the world premiere of Hawley's "Three American Folk Hymns" for chorus and string orchestra commissioned by and dedicated to Rivers and the VAE.

Also on the program were "Kentucky Psalms" by Alice Parker, "A Set of Chinese Folk Songs" by Chen Yi and two works that partake of folk tradition, either musically or by subject matter: quintessential English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams' Serenade to Music and Arthur Bliss' 1928 "Pastorale: 'Lie Strown the White Flocks'" about spring frolics in ancient Greece.

Hawley's work utilizes three hymns, combined and expanded from various sources into a single movement. Text for "Salvation" ("Oh the Joyful Sound") comes from "The Missouri Harmony" (published in Cincinnati in 1846). "Autumn" ("See the leaves around ye falling") uses text from both "The Missouri Harmony" and "School Harmonist" (New York, 1883). The third hymn, "Love is Now Our Crown" was composed by Hawley on verses from an 18th-century wall hanging in the Ephrata Cloister in Ephrata, Pennsylvania.

Hawley, who has written for the VAE before, has crafted this into a richly textured work that

spiraled into a lush, choral-orchestral sound.

Parker, a distinguished composer, conductor and teacher who studied choral conducting with Robert Shaw, wrote her 1984 "Kentucky Psalms" for the bicentennial of The Presbyterian Church in Danville, Kentucky. A cantata for mixed chorus, flute and strings, the work comprises four hymns from the early 19th-century shape note song books "Kentucky Harmony" and "Kentucky Harmonist."

The first, "Zion," radiated joy -- and somehow reminded this listener of "All Creatures of Our God and King," harmonized by Vaughan Williams from a 17th-century original. The second, "Vergennes," was a plaintive longing for home: "The sparrow builds herself a nest and suffers no remove . . ."

"Amanda," a stark reflection on death, wreathed in sorrow by CCO principal cellist Patrick Binford's solos, featured the men of the VAE. "Washington," described by Parker as a jig and a statement on "the joys of community," was bright and celebratory, a bit like the Christmas carol known as the Sussex Carol ("On Christmas Night All Christians Sing"). CCO flutist Susan Magg gave the entire work a lovely resonance.

One of the treats on the program was Chinese composer Chen Yi's "Folk Songs," written for the vocal ensemble Chanticleer when she was its composer-in-residence in 1994. The set of ten songs stems from Chen Yi's researches into Chinese folk music and includes songs from eight provinces and five ethnic groups. Four were performed on the Anderson Center concert.

"Fengyang Song," a jaunty tune from Anhui province, featured CCO percussionist Scott Lang on drum and cymbal. "The Flowing Stream," a love song from Yunnan province, featured countertenor Michael Wisdom in a ravishing solo, the chorus singing along wordlessly. "Diu, Diu Dong," a Taiwanese folk song, was pure delight, beginning almost like a fiddle tune, with sharp inhalations and exhalations by the choristers that evoked a steam engine climbing up a mountain.

The concluding "Mayila, a Sinkiang folk song, was gently melodic, with the CCO strings strumming along pizzicato.

The concert was framed by Vaughan Williams' luscious Serenade and Bliss' "Pastorale."

Vaughan Williams' Serenade is known to have brought arch-romantic Sergei Rachmaninoff to tears and well it could. It is a gorgeous effusion on some of Shakespeare's most beautiful verses: "How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank! Here we will sit and let the sounds of music creep in our ears . . ." (from act V of "The Merchant of Venice"). The numerous solo parts gave individual VAE members opportunity to shine as it built to a lustrous climax, then returned to the "sweet harmony" from whence it came. CCO assistant concertmaster Sujean Kim added lines of limpid beauty.

Mezzo-soprano Andria Helm, an artist diploma student at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, rendered "The Pigeon Song" from Bliss' cantata with stunning clarity and fullness. (A timid lover sends a note to her beloved via a tame pigeon.) Magg announced the arrival of Pan and provided much of the work's vivid tone painting. The texts by everyone from Theocritus to Ben Jonson and Robert Nichols ("Pigeon Song") were given a lively, dramatic interpretation. Pan's Sarabande, an orchestral section, had a serious, godlike dignity, countered effectively by the chorus in Pan and Echo's lilting, flirtatious exchange.

"Folk Music Festival II" is 2 p.m. April 19 at Memorial Hall downtown. The one-time-only concert will be led by CCO music director Mischa Santora. On the program are Dvorak's

Serenade in D Minor, Folk Songs (1964) by Luciano Berio with soprano Sarah Wolfson, the world premiere of "...repercussions..." by CCM professor Joel Hoffman and Serenade in F Minor (1906) by Hungarian composer Leo Weiner. For information and tickets, visit the CCO web site at www.cocincinnati.org or call (513) 723-1182.