

An American Tapestry

Saturday, October 23, 2010
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Scranton

Sunday, October 24, 2010
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Wilkes-Barre

PROGRAM

Joy, shipmate, joy!Steven Thomas (b. 1970)

Hark, I hear the harps eternal..... arr. Alice Parker (b. 1925)
Alene Olsommer, soprano

David's lamentationWilliam Billings (1746-1800)

When David heard Norman Dinerstein (1937-1982)
Kathleen C. Shucosky, soprano

The peace of wild things Joan Szymko (b. 1957)
Larry Hickernell, tenor

FROSTIANA.....Randall Thompson (1899-1984)

1. The road not taken
5. A girl's garden
6. Stopping by woods on a snowy evening
7. Choose something like a star

~ Intermission ~

The best of all possible worlds.....Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Shenandoah.....arr. James Erb (b. 1926)

To be sung on the water Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Java jive Ben Oakland (1907-1979)
arr. Kirby Shaw

Alene Olsommer, soprano
Mariane Ferrantino, alto
Larry Hickernell, tenor
Llewellyn Miller, bass

Love Lost..... Paul Sjolund (b. 1935)

1. One perfect rose
2. When you're away
3. Careless talk
4. Your little hands

Wade in the water..... arr. Moses Hogan (1957-2003)

Linda Hickernell, alto
George Levandowski, bass
Catherine Carter, soprano

Ching-a-ring-chawAaron Copland (1900-1990)
arr. Irving Fine

America, the beautiful..... Samuel A. Ward (1847-1903)
arr. Marvin Gaspard

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

The fabric of this country's rich musical heritage has many strands, far too many to explore in any one concert. For today's program we have taken a few of these different threads, including music from early America, patriotic music, folksong, spiritual, jazz, humorous songs, music by major 20th century American composers and settings of important American poets, and woven them into what we are calling *An American Tapestry*.

The program begins with the premiere of a new work that I composed for the Chorale. Many composers before me have found Walt Whitman's words to be a source of musical inspiration, and as I searched for an American text that spoke to me I found myself following in their footsteps. I was paging through Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and came across the following poem:

Joy, shipmate, joy!
(Pleas'd to my soul at death I cry,
Our life is closed, our life begins,
The long, long anchorage we leave,
The ship is clear at last, she leaps!
She swiftly courses from the shore,
Joy, shipmate, joy!

Something about the force of the poet's optimism in the face of death struck me, and as I read over the first and last lines I heard in my mind the music that now opens the piece. As I lived with the poem and I worked on the music, I gradually realized that I was exploring through the music the tension between the optimism of the poem and the doubt of an idealized reader, and following the reader's journey from fear to joy, and ultimately to the edge of the unknowable.

The program continues with an arrangement by Alice Parker of an early American hymn that treats a similar topic in more straightforward fashion. The tune first appeared in William Walker's *Southern Harmony*, a shape note hymn book published in 1835 in Philadelphia.

The shape note hymn singing tradition traces its ancestry in part back to the music of William Billings, who was the first significant American composer. His "David's Lamentation" recounts the Biblical story of King David's reaction to the news that his favorite son Absalom, who led a revolt against the king, had been killed by the king's soldiers.

Where Billings' setting is stark in its simplicity, the setting of the same story by Norman Dinerstein is dramatic and complex, slowly building to a heart-wrenching climax. Writing about this piece, the composer says the story is "simultaneously both personal and universal, and the intention of this setting is to incorporate both of these elements; the choral techniques used to achieve this end range from the directness of monodic passages to the complexity of eight-part textures." The Chorale then follows sorrow with the solace of the natural world in Joan Szymko's "The Peace of Wild Things," on a text by American poet Wendell Berry.

Like Berry, Robert Frost often looked to nature for inspiration, though not always as a source of comfort. In 1959, American composer Randall Thompson was commissioned to write a work celebrating the bicentennial of the town of Amherst, Massachusetts, where Robert Frost had lived and taught for a number of years. Accordingly, Thompson selected seven of Frost's poems, set them to music, and called the collection *Frostiana*. Today the Chorale will perform the first, fifth, sixth and last movements of the collection.

In the opening movement, "The road not taken," the seemingly innocuous choices of the present are portrayed by the singers, while the dramatic and unforeseeable future consequences of those choices play out in the piano accompaniment. The women of the Chorale then perform "A girl's garden," an amusing portrayal of a woman's recollection of her youth. The men of the Chorale follow with a spell-binding setting of one of Frost's most famous poems, "Stopping by woods on a snowy evening." The set ends with "Choose something like a star," in which a star, even as it is simultaneously understood

scientifically, still serves as a source of inspiration. In the opening section of the piece, the piano and sopranos together illustrate the enduring values embodied by the star, and the piano accompaniment is also filled with ascending gestures that invite us to send our gaze upward.

After intermission, the Chorale returns with “The Best of all Possible Worlds” from Leonard Bernstein’s operetta *Candide*. The operetta is based on Voltaire’s work of the same name, which satirizes the optimism of the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. That optimism is in full display in this song, which takes the form of a philosophy lesson given by *Candide*’s mentor Dr. Pangloss.

The folk song “Shenandoah” was probably written sometime in the middle of the 19th century, and may have originated as a sea shanty, but the details of its origin are obscure. It is not even clear whether the “Shenandoah” of the song’s title refers to the Shenandoah river or an Indian chief living by the Missouri River, or both. These ambiguities have done little to dampen the popularity of the song, beautifully arranged here by James Erb. Sea shanties were work songs designed to be sung on ships, and while Barber’s “To be sung on the water” is not a work song, it does evoke images of the pulling of oars and the passing of waves. Both the men and the women take turns rowing as time, life and love pass away into the distance.

The program now turns to music of a lighter nature. “Java jive” was a hit for the Ink Spots in 1940, and was covered more recently by the Manhattan Transfer. Paul Sjolund’s set of “love” songs seem sweet at first, but each one twists in an unexpected and humorous direction as the sweetness turns bitter. The set was composed in 1969 for the Norman Luboff Choir.

“Wade in the water,” a spiritual that features three soloists from the Chorale, refers to the healing power of a particular pool of water mentioned in the Gospel of John. It has also been suggested that the lyrics were thinly-veiled instructions to escaping slaves on how to avoid capture. “Ching-a-ring-chaw” was originally a minstrel song, and while the melody appealed to Aaron Copland, the lyrics did not. Accordingly, Copland kept the tune and modified the words, one of the few times he acted as his own lyricist. The words of the title, which are original, are intended to imitate the sound of a banjo.

Today’s program comes to a rousing finish with Marvin Gaspard’s arrangement of “America, the Beautiful.” The words were written by Katharine Lee Bates in 1893 after a trip by train from Massachusetts to Colorado, and the music was written in 1882 by Samuel A. Ward as a hymn tune to other words. The text and the tune were first joined in 1904, and together they have since become one of the most popular American patriotic songs.

– Notes by Steven Thomas