
SECTIONS

Wednesday, September 13, 2017

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Vital energy

By Don Dagenais Tue, Aug 08, 2017

The 28 singers of KC VITAs gave an impressive demonstration of cohesiveness and vitality last weekend under the talented direction of Jackson Thomas.



In a city where there are many fine choral ensembles, KC VITA's stands out since it is dedicated solely to the performance of contemporary music. This means that many of its

performances call for exquisite intonation, a careful balancing of sections, and meticulous direction, and often without the benefit of accompaniment, as many modern choral compositions are for *a capella* groups.

The concert featured a dozen different works by contemporary composers, none of them familiar to this reviewer. It opened with "Yih'yu L'Ratzon" by Boston composer Ari Sussman, sung by a divided choir, half in front of the Country Club Christian Church and the other half positioned in the choir loft. The piece consisted of constantly shifting chords of difficult tonality over a vocal continuo.

Nebraskan David von Kampen contributed "Here Among the Flowers," set to a poem by G. K. Chesterton, the early 20th century English poet and novelist. Held together by a constant intonation of the words "chattering finch," this sometimes humorous piece was appealingly sung.

Nika Leoni, a Russian-American composer, supplied six songs, divided into two sets of three, performed by sopranos Jennifer White and Elizabeth Birgen with able accompaniment by pianist Charles Dickinson. The music was melodic and enjoyable. White earnestly delivered the first three songs, gamely navigating their shifting tonalities and displaying fine high notes. Birger's selections required a more powerful, almost operatic-quality voice, and she delivered the goods with an intense performance.

Ben Zucker, a Californian, composed "When We Arrive at Home," featuring sudden shifts of volume and tonality. The piece was written to music by the 18th century theologian and poet Charles Wesley.

The concert's first half ended with "Conversations With Strangers" by Pennsylvanian Natalie Dietterich, which indeed sounded like conversations among friends, with one speaker (sung as solos), multiple speakers at once (ensembles), and cacophonous arguments (the entire choir), with lines stepping over each other as happens in conversations, and punctuated by sharp exclamations. The sometimes staggered, staccato-like delivery must have taken much practice, and true singing was interspersed with *sprechstimme*.

Swedish composer Illian Lundberg's "Wondrous sacrifice," a religious piece, began the second half, featuring constantly shifting chords and a rich bass line.

A piece called "Hvem er det" by Louisianan Yotam Haber featured a trio of women, two sopranos (Melissa Faltermeier and Suzanne Hatcher) and an alto (Joanna Ehlers), who were called upon to produce, at various times, sliding vocal effects, a kind of plainchant, semitones, and clucking and other vocal percussive effects. Sudden outbursts punctuated the often difficult music. This listener found the atonality and sometimes violent exclamations somewhat grating after a while, but the performers gamely stuck with it and served the music well, without any shrieking or undisciplined sounds.

An all-woman chorus performed "My Father" by Scottish composer Chris Hutchings, an appealing work.

The two finest compositions on the program, in this reviewer's estimation, were "Deep in the Quiet Wood" by Joshua Fishbein of Baltimore and "O Sapientia" by Doug Byler of New Jersey.

The first piece offered a comforting return to more traditional tonality, and was beautifully rendered. The music was romantic without being trite, touching without requiring unusual effects, and featured a richly melodic baritone solo, ably delivered by Joshua Markley, who displayed a beautiful round tone and ringing high notes.

"O Sapientia," a lovely and moving composition, demonstrated a firm command of musical lines, with rich climaxes and affecting soft sections, all nicely sung by the choir. The composer, who was in attendance, received a warm and deserved round of applause.

The concert concluded with "Beneath the Wave" by Luke Flynn of Los Angeles, which began and ended with wind sound effects, and featured a pattern of shifting chords paced by a constant repetition of thirds. Alyssa Toepfer courageously performed a seemingly wordless soprano solo requiring piercing high notes. The number ended softly, bringing a peaceful end to the concert.

KC VITAs records all of its concerts, so those who missed it can enjoy the music on CD, available on the organization's website. Hats off to the choir and its conductor for the obviously loving care and hard work lavished on these new compositions, many of them by deserving composers who should be heard more frequently.

REVIEW:

KC VITAs Chamber Choir

KC VITAs 2017 Summer Series

Friday, August 4 at 7:00 p.m.

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
 1307 Holmes Street, Kansas City, MO
 And
 Sunday, August 6 at 3:00 p.m. (Reviewed)
 Country Club Christian Church
 6101 Ward Parkway, Kansas City, MO
 For more information visit <http://kcvitas.org/index.html>

By *Don Dagenais*



City Classics Music Columnist; Classical Contributor

Don Dagenais is a classical music and opera geek who has attended performances in Kansas City, nationally and around the world for over forty years. He had some academic training in music and was an amateur musician in his salad days, but has gained his musical chops as an audience member, board member, independent researcher and frequent

lecturer on classical music and opera to civic and community organizations. He is a longtime preview speaker for the Lyric Opera of Kansas City. He has also spoken on classical music and opera subjects at several national conventions.

Don has served on numerous arts organization boards and has been the president of most of them, including the Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, Summerfest, Kansas City Civic Opera, Inspiration Point Fine Arts Festival (Opera in the Ozarks), The Coterie and the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre. He has won several awards as an arts volunteer, including a Bravo award from a national organization for being one of the leading opera volunteers in the country and the Virtuoso award from ArtsKC, the Regional Arts Council, for being a leading arts volunteer in the Kansas City area.

Don is a charter member of the KCMetropolis.org staff and has written the classical music column, and also occasional reviews, since the first issue on October 5, 2008.

In his professional life Don is a senior real estate attorney with Lathrop & Gage, a major Midwestern law firm. He also teaches courses on real estate law and serves as an adjunct professor for the University of Missouri-Kansas City in both the business and law schools. His degrees are from Grinnell College and the Cornell Law School. He and his wife Patricia have been married for over forty years and have two daughters, now grown, both of whom were raised "in the arts." They are now doing the same with a grandson.

