

# Recording Reviews

*Peter J. Durov, Editor*

*Back Home in Southern Mississippi:  
The Music of James Quitman Mulholland  
Southern Chorale, The University of Southern  
Mississippi*  
Gregory Fuller, Conductor  
Colla Voce Music LLC, 2014  
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James Quitman Mulholland's compositions have garnered a respected position within today's choral canon. Because of their rich sonorities and expansive melodic lines, Mulholland's compositions appeal to musicians and audiences of all levels. In light of these musical qualities, the University of Southern Mississippi's Southern Chorale, with their warm tone and rich timbre, is a fitting choice to present a retrospective of Mulholland's compositions. In this 2014 recording, *Back Home in Southern Mississippi*, the Southern Chorale, under the direction of Gregory Fuller, offers listeners a collection of both well-known and rarely heard works of Mulholland. Through their moving and impeccable performance, the Southern Chorale demonstrates why Mulholland's works are synonymous with choral excellence.

A refined musicality isn't the only reason why the Southern Chorale is a worthy ensemble to present Mulholland's compositions. The University of Southern Mississippi has a long history with the composer as Mulholland, a native Mississippian, attended the university during his education. It is only fitting that Mulholland's music be combined with the tradition of choral excellence found with Fuller and the Southern Chorale. Although

several ensembles have devoted entire recordings to Mulholland's works—including the Kansas City Chorale and the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire—this recording is unique in that several works are recorded for the first time in an a cappella version.

However, a retrospective recording of a single composer presents challenges to both the performer and the listener. When a composer has perfected a signature style with recognizable musical tropes, how must an ensemble present a recording of considerable length that ebbs and flows without being “too much of a good thing” for the listener's ears? A conductor and audio producer must be attentive to this and, moreover, the recording's track listing so that the audience is compelled to listen to the entire recording without dulling their senses with similar styles.

With the exception of just a few instances, the majority of this recording's tracks flow effortlessly to the next. Of special note is the first track, *A Dawn Song*, which is a fitting invocation to Mulholland's music. With its declamatory

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articulations and dance-like tempo, the Southern Chorale's performance honors the work's lush harmonies while being sensitive to articulations. Fuller's attention to melodic direction is evident in the ensemble's phrasing, allowing each note to swell musically without becoming a choral cliché.

Evidence of the ensemble's understanding of textual phrasing is found in the fifth track, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*. With each onset, the choir effortlessly phrases to the essential points of Byron's text. Moreover, this performance illustrates the Southern Chorale's nuanced repose at the end of each line.

In *Kéramos*, the penultimate work on this recording, the Southern Chorale demonstrates a command of line and transparency within this work's contrapuntal texture; no difficult accomplishment, especially considering the very live acoustics of the recording space. Each vocal section is sensitive to the prevailing lines during moments of imitation while adjusting their tone during more homophonic passages. Given the ensemble's facility in executing the score's demands, this track might have been better placed towards the middle of the recording, thus adding textual variety between tracks.

In *Missa Romantica*, the recording's final work, Fuller and the Southern Chorale perform with both power and intimacy, and ultimately make this selection a perfect conclusion for a Mulholland retrospective. Originally published with orchestral accompaniment, this recording is unique in that it is the first a cappella recording of *Missa Romantica*. With their control of articulation, dynamics, and sonority, this performance is clearly the highlight among the recording's many superior moments.

While the Southern Chorale demonstrates a sophisticated approach to textual interpretation and phrasing, it is unfortunate that liner notes did not accompany this recording, especially since the words of Byron, Yeats, Longfellow, and Browning so obviously were a major inspiration for Mulholland. Access to the poetry would aid listeners unfamiliar with these works, especially since the live acoustics, while enhancing the ensemble's mature tone, often cloud text clarity.

Another outstanding aspect of this recording is the performance by soprano Anastasia Talley. Featured on two selections, Talley possesses the warmth and richness necessary to soar through the thick texture of *How Do I Love Thee*, while also expressing great sensitivity and musical nuance in the "Benedictus, Hosanna" from *Missa Romantica*.

It is indeed fortunate for choral musicians and audience members that the Southern Chorale at The University of Southern Mississippi turned their talents to the works of James Quitman Mulholland. Not only is this recording valuable to the amateur musician but is also useful to many singers who will encounter Mulholland's works throughout their education. Gregory Fuller and the Southern Chorale are perfect conduits for transmitting Mulholland's musical legacy to audiences everywhere.

— C. Michael Porter