

Book Reviews

Andrew Crow, Editor

Lighting a Candle:

The Writings and Wisdom of Elaine Brown

James Jordan, Sonya Garfinkle,

and Janet Yamron

GIA Publications, 2015

218 pages, \$24.95, soft cover; includes a DVD

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Lighting a Candle: *The Writings and Wisdom of Elaine Brown* offers inspiring and thoughtful insight into a remarkable musician and teacher. In part the book functions as a biography of Elaine Brown emphasizing her dedicated work with Singing City, the vital and celebrated Philadelphia choir she founded in 1948. The emphasis on Singing City is deliberate and necessary to understand Brown's work. Singing City emerged from the Fellowship House movement, which was dedicated to the belief that differences between races, religions, and cultures could be bridged by ordinary people coming together in shared activities. This directly reflects the philosophies and beliefs of its founder, who spent her life masterfully changing the world by building community within and through her choirs.

While the authors detail Brown's emphasis on community and the non-musical elements of her choirs, they make it clear that this should not be mistaken for a lack of attention to building musical excellence. In fact, just the opposite was true. Dr. Brown was driven by the conviction that "superbly prepared and performed choral music at the highest artistic level" (page xv) was vital to the greater humanitarian visions she championed. The authors portray Brown as a visionary who was

not afraid to stretch the comfort zone of both choir and audience. In 1955, Singing City toured a recently desegregated South with an integrated choir to show the power of integration. Similarly, the choir toured the Middle East twice in an effort to understand and to help heal the religious rifts of the region.

In addition to founding Singing City, Dr. Brown served on the faculties of Temple University, Westminster Choir College, the Julliard School, and Union Theological Seminary. Among many other honors, she was awarded four honorary doctorates, the *Prix d'excellence* by the French government for remarkable achievements in conducting, was the first American woman to ever conduct the Philadelphia Orchestra, and received the American Choral Directors Association's award for distinguished service. She earned the love and admiration of musical luminaries such as Helmuth Rilling, Eugene Ormandy, Nadia Boulanger, Joseph Flummerfelt, and Weston Noble.

These biographical elements are worthwhile but the greater purpose of the book is to share

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Elaine Brown's philosophy of choral music and its effect beyond the scope of music. The authors invite readers to ponder methods and motives for creating greater community in their own choirs. Jordan, Garfinkle, and Yamron offer as evidence the example of this remarkable pioneer with their own testimony as her accomplished students. In so doing, the authors have captured the hallmark of Brown's teaching—to inspire—and they have successfully shared that with the reader.

The book is divided into six parts. Part I is a collection of writings about Dr. Brown by the three authors as well as former colleagues Jeffrey Cornelius and Helmuth Rilling. Part II is biographical with an adapted chapter by Joan Whittemore derived from a prior publication and the first of two photographic essays. Part III includes a compilation of writings by Elaine Brown. They show her depth, thoughtfulness, humility, and wit. After reading so much about her, Brown's own words allow the reader a more personal insight. Part IV tells how Brown used seating charts to accomplish her extra-musical goals in her rehearsals. Part V includes a summary of the chronological highlights in Brown's life and career. It also details Singing City and Temple University performances with the Philadelphia Orchestra and her connection to Westminster Choir College. Part VI is a companion chapter for the DVD that accompanies the book, a recorded lecture by Dr. Brown that she delivered at Westminster Choir College in May of 1988 to the college alumni.

Although the book will not likely serve as a conventional textbook for college courses, it would be a valuable text for anyone studying conducting, particularly at the graduate level. While philosophical, the book also addresses practical elements such as breath and seating charts with a fresh perspective and an eye toward greater purpose. The ideas in the book are worthwhile to

anyone working as a conductor at any level, sure to challenge and inspire. The book reads quickly, yet the advanced ideas it holds are worth revisiting and exploring over time. The book was clearly a labor of love by the authors, and it is easy to see why: Elaine Brown's legacy offers guidance and wisdom valuable to any conductor, and a most welcome additional encouragement to female conductors from a pioneer of the 20th century.

—*Andrew Robinette*

A History of Western Choral Music, Volume 2

Chester L. Alwes

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In a recent issue of the *Choral Scholar* (Volume 5, Number 2, Spring 2016) Andrew Minear offered a review of Chester Alwes's *A History of Western Choral Music, Volume 1*; I review the companion volume, the last in the set, subtitled "Romanticism through the Avant-Garde." Volume 2 picks up where Volume 1 left off, completing the genres common to the Classic and Romantic periods (e.g. oratorio), but Alwes concedes that recent developments in music history make categorization by genre more difficult. He thus organizes the middle chapters of this volume by "isms:" Impressionism (chapter 5), Serialism (chapter 6), Nationalism (chapter 7), and Neo-classicism (chapter 8). Finally, Alwes resorts to grouping composers by nationality: e.g. "The American Experience" (chapter 11), and The British Isles (chapter 12). His preface includes an apology to contemporary composers whose work cannot yet be put "into any lasting or meaningful historical context" (p. ix); Alwes also acknowledges

“a lack of thorough discussion of the important contributions” (p. x) to choral music by Canada and Latin America. He does, however, devote more space to the Canadian icon R. Murray Schafer (b. 1933) than he does to Eric Whitacre (b. 1970), perhaps due to the perspective of time cited above.

While I personally cannot suggest a better organization scheme, the inherent difficulties of this one become obvious soon enough. Composers that straddle these classifications appear in multiple chapters: Igor Stravinsky appears in no less than four, as a choral symphonist (*Symphony of Psalms*), a serialist (*Canticum Sacrum*), a Russian nationalist (*Four Russian Peasant songs*), and a neoclassicist (*Mass*). Such difficulties in taxonomy do not interrupt the narrative unless the reader is looking for a cohesive narrative on a given composer: for example Hector Berlioz’s *Faust* (Op. 24) is “dramatic music” (p. 77-79), but his *Romeo et Juliet* is labeled a “choral symphony” (p. 97-98). Some might wish for a more obvious continuity between the contemporary Estonian giants of Veljo Tormis (1930-2017), the nationalist in chapter 7, and Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), the minimalist in chapter 13. However, readers seeking further information have ample resources suggested in a 12-page bibliography at the end of the book.

Alwes continues the pattern he established in Volume 1 of supplying only the necessary biographic background for the composers to give their works context; the emphasis remains on the compositions. With any given composer Alwes gives priority to their longer compositions, but this is understandable in a monograph with encyclopedic scope. The book is replete with excerpts, facsimiles of the original manuscripts, and charts summarizing the form of many works discussed; nearly every page includes a graphic or illustration. This gives the text more readability than other similar publications. A work of

monumental scholarship, Alwes’s publication is valuable as a textbook, as a quick reference, or as a continuous narrative detailing choral music’s dramatic history.

Alwes successfully traverses the opposing pitfalls of remaining only with the undisputed masters and giving too much attention to lesser-known composers; his suggestions for potential new discoveries, such as the male-choir music of Peter Cornelius, the “Latin Psalms” (Op. 9) of contemporary Danish composer Bernhard Lewkovitch, or little-known gems such as Gabriel Faure’s “Madrigal” (Op. 35) and Antonin Dvorjak’s “Songs of Nature” (Op. 63) make appreciable revelations. He promotes other composers who are arguably not so well known, devoting space to Hans Werner Henze’s oratorio *Das Floss der Medusa* and Mauricio Kagel’s *Chorbuch*; he also discusses the contributions of Salvatore Martirano, Brian Fernyhough, Goffredo Petrassi, and Eskil Hemberg.

One could always take issue with the attention given to certain pieces instead of others (e.g. Robert Schumann’s *Das Paradies und die Peri* is awarded six pages, while Théodore Dubois’ *Seven Last Words* is not mentioned). But who wants to second-guess, for example, which of Schubert’s part songs best illustrate his contributions to the genre? Alwes’s ninth chapter, “The Avant-Garde Aesthetic” is no shorter than the others, illustrating his refusal to neglect important works in genres that are harder to both perform and approach. If this chapter is of less practical use to conductors, it is all the more valuable to musicologists.

When presented with the sheer enormity of presenting the history of choral music in two volumes, most authors would balk at the audacity of the task, but Alwes has risen to the challenge and teachers in our field should be grateful. The

occasional misprint or error (e.g. the opening sentence of chapter 10 seems to be from an early draft) does little to distract the reader from the erudition of Alwes's scholarship. The amount of information in many paragraphs could be daunting for undergraduates, but my impression was that these volumes are aimed at a graduate school market, where I suspect they will become the industry standard.

—*Vaughn Roste*