

Recording Reviews

Peter J. Duroow, Editor

Evening Hymn

Georgia State University Singers

Deanna Joseph, conductor

Gothic Records

G-49298 (2016; 76'13")

E*vening Hymn* is the first professional release by the Georgia State University Singers under the direction of Deanna Joseph. The disc was released on iTunes and Amazon in April, 2016. You will want to purchase this recording because of the innovative programming that celebrates the universal importance of nighttime rituals. The choir sings with great musicality, excellent intonation, clear diction, and a healthy and beautiful pallet of tone colors to deliver a diverse program of choral music from many different traditions.

The disc jacket contains a wealth of information with rich and full program notes by Dr. Marie Sumner Lott. Texts and translations are provided along with artist's photos and biographies. Additional photos of the recording session at Peachtree Road United Methodist Church are included throughout the disc jacket along with information about the organ and the technology that was utilized in the recording process.

The first track, H. Balfour Gardiner's *Evening Hymn*, draws the listener in and puts them in the lush sound of the early twentieth century. The organ is featured and the choir sings expressively throughout with a clear and warm tone. It is immediately followed by the Thomas Tallis setting of the same text, *Te lucis ante terminum*, which employs unison chant alternating with 5-part

writing in the middle stanza. The choir sings with transparency and sensitivity to arching phrases in both the Thomas Tallis setting and also in John Sheppard's popular setting of *In Pace*.

Felix Mendelssohn's *Here My Prayer* is the longest track on the recording with lovely performances by Maria Valdes, soprano and Nicole Marane, organist. The chorus delivers declamatory statements that have similar elements as those found in choruses from Mendelssohn's *Elijah* along with warm and peaceful moments that depict rest after a struggle.

Erin Palmer, pianist, is a welcome feature on the next two selections. Karl Böhm's *Still wie di Nacht* and Johannes Brahms's *Der gang zum liebchen* sparkle with secular German Romanticism.

Edward Elgar's unaccompanied choral song *Serenade* contrasts the previous material with the sopranos singing long lyrical lines with clipped march-like rhythms in the lower three parts. This piece bridges the musical focus for the rest of the recording as it shifts to music of living

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composers—Jonathan Dove, Imant Raminsk, Eriks Esenvalds, Veljo Tormis, Andrew Rindfleisch, Dan Forrest and Susan LaBarr.

Jonathan Dove's *Seek him that maketh the seven stars* presents a stunning variety of textures with dancelike motives, shimmering chords, rich dynamic contrast, pedal tones and reverent Alleluias. The organ is once again featured on this creative anthem that is a highlight of the disc.

Imant Raminsh's *In the Night We Shall Go In* features Erin Ellis, cellist, and Erin Palmer, pianist, in a sensuous dialog between the piano and cello. The instrumental dialog provides a refreshing change in timbre as the remaining seven tracks on the disc are unaccompanied.

Eriks Esenvalds' *Evening* features Carolyn Balkovetz as the soprano soloist. A tip of the hat must be given to Carolyn as she is also listed as an alto in the Georgia State University Singers roster. The chorus's focused tone and excellent intonation is to be commended. The *Four Estonian Lullabies* by Veljo Tormis provide another welcome color from the choir that is higher, brighter, and lighter to execute long sustained vowels and also warm and legato when delivering melodic material.

Dr. Marie Sumner Lott's program notes reveal that "the last three works on the recording explore the theme of lullabies and music of parting, and they bring the listener back to the mood of the end of the day heard in the opening tracks."

Collegiate conductors will appreciate the innovative programming, expressive singing and range of colors found throughout the disc. This highly commendable debut recording

with Gothic Records has this reviewer looking forward to future releases from the Georgia State University Singers under the direction of Deanna Joseph.

—Peter J. Durow

Dan Locklair: Gloria

Sospiri, Christopher Watson, conductor
Winchester College Chapel Choir and
The Portsmouth Grammar School Chamber
Choir, Malcom Archer, conductor
Convivium Records
CR003 (2016; 73'31")

The new compact disc *Gloria*, featuring the choral music of American composer Dan Locklair (b. 1949), presents fresh recordings of many of the composer's works. Featuring multiple British choirs, including the Winchester College Chapel Choir, the Portsmouth Grammar School Chamber Choir, and Sospiri, the album also is a good representation of contemporary British choral performance practice and style. Three choirs were combined to record these pieces, with adult women and children's voices combined together.

For the uninitiated it may be helpful to provide a summary of Dan Locklair and describe his musical style. Locklair is from North Carolina and was educated at Union Theological Seminary where he earned a Master of Sacred Music degree. He also earned a D.M.A. from the Eastman School of Music. He currently serves as Professor of Music at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. Unlike many American composers, Locklair's choral music has successfully penetrated the European market and his works are sung broadly across both North American and many European

countries. A cursory listen to his choral works quickly explains why this is: his music is of such high craft and sophistication that it transcends any sense of a regional or national sound. Locklair's musical style can be best described as eclectic. Elements of Howells and Pärt are offset by dancing syncopated dance rhythms moments later. To describe his harmonic language in the most banal of terms, his music is tonal and triadic with many added sixths, major sevenths, ninths, augmented fourths, and unresolved dissonances. He never lingers too long in any key, but shifts often, always providing fresh colors.

The highlight of the album is the lengthy Gloria, an extended work for choir, brass octet, and percussion ensemble. It was premiered in 1999 by the Choral Art Society in Portland, Maine. Clocking in at a little over fourteen minutes on this recording, this is a significant contribution to the repertoire. Opening with a brief fanfare for brass and percussion, the choir begins singing from the rear of the performance space, perhaps evoking the song of the angels singing from afar. Beautiful homophony gives way to the middle dancing section as the opening text is repeated. "Delightful" would be a fitting adjective for this portion. The middle, reflective section, beginning with the text "Domine Deus" evokes the ethereal, minimalistic style of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. Gloria builds to a thrilling climax of brass and divisi choir and would serve as a wonderful addition to a Christmas program for a collegiate or skilled community choir. As with much of Locklair's choral music, sustained high notes may tire the sopranos.

The rest of the album is dedicated to Locklair's anthems and motets. They will be discussed briefly in the order they appear on the recording. *Lord Jesus, Think on Me* opens the album, a new setting of the traditional hymn by church father Synesius of Cyrene. This anthem is set for SATB and

organ. Dissonances in the treble voices of a minor second again strongly evoke Pärt. Locklair alternates between treble and lower voices for contrast and perhaps to emphasize rhetorically the need for all of humanity to beg for God's mercy. The anthem builds to a rousing, *forte* climax via modulation and rising tessituras supported by sustained chords in the organ. Minor intonation infractions by treble voices in the children can be noted and forgiven.

A set of three unaccompanied anthems follow, *The Isaiah Canticles: Surely, It is God Who Saves; Seek the Lord; Arise, Shine, for your Light has Come*. Although any of these three anthems could be sung individually they work well when sung as set. Set for SATB divisi, these works would challenge any skilled choir to perfectly tune the cluster chords and sing the syncopations correctly. But perhaps most challenging of all is the breath control needed for sustained chords. *Arise, Shine* in particular pushes the sopranos to the extreme—at times it sounds as though they might snap under the pressure of the high notes. But if your choir has the horses for this race, these canticles could be astounding and thrilling in a concert.

Angel Song, for SATB and organ, is one of two Christmas pieces on the album. A highly chromatic organ introduction gives way to the choir "breaking forth" the song of the angels as they announce the good news of Christ's birth. As with most of Locklair's music on this album, little is done in small proportions. The anthem has great breadth and length, prolifically moving through the text in a through-composed style, united by motives. The second Christmas track is the motet *En Natus Est Emmanuel* for SSAATTBB and SA soli, unaccompanied. This work is much more placid and introspective, emphasizing color through added-tone chords. While the choir sustains rich, gorgeous, colorful chords, the SA duets create an effect of angelic innocence and wonder.

O Sacrum Convivium is a “serene” setting of this traditional communion text. For SATB voices, the gentle rhythms, slower tempo, homophonic texture, and general consonance make this one of Locklair’s more accessible works. A skilled church choir could sing this motet. *Ubi Caritas* is for unison voices and organ, but it is not necessarily an easy or simple work. Sudden key changes, chromaticism, and prevalent use of the augmented fourth may challenge some choirs. Also, though no mention of source material is mentioned in the liner notes, this reviewer heard clear melodic allusions to the *Dies Irae* chant tune, a strange and interesting association with this text. *Ave Verum Corpus*, SATB divisi, might be described as a signature example of Locklair’s unaccompanied choral music: generally homophonic, added-note chords, sustained singing, high tessitura for sopranos, and building to a loud climax proceeded and followed by soft serenity. *Pater Noster*, the Latin setting of the Lord’s Prayer, is very similar to *Ave Verum* in regards to style.

St. Peter’s Rock is one of the most important works of the album, a brilliant anthem contrasting solo trumpet, organ, and SATB. This work alone includes both seamless key *and* meter changes that provide effective transitions between contrasting sections. Idiomatic grace notes embellish the melodies in a way that is both pleasing and effortless. Another interesting contrast used by Locklair is that of text; he sets the Latin text against English from the Gospel of Matthew, Genesis, and the psalms, creating a truly dramatic and theologically rich work. *St. Peter’s Rock* ends with a loud climax and feels satisfying in its conclusion. Highly recommended.

In Remembrance, for SATB, organ, and organ, is a memorial anthem based on the Beatitudes. Much more strophic than the other tracks, this work places more emphasis on the importance of the text. A simple chordal style makes *In Remembrance* accessible to most choirs.

The Lord Bless You and Keep You is the only miniature anthem/motet on the album. Less than two minutes long, it is a simple and effective anthem suitable for a concert or for liturgical use. Moderate ranges and undivided SATB voices make it an easier work. There is no ego in this piece, but simply an honest and sincere musical blessing.

—Jonathan Campbell