

Recording Reviews

Jace Saplan, editor



Once Upon A Time
Skylark Vocal Ensemble
Matthew Guard
artistic director
B083SSZZW2
(2020; 67'00")

Many of us are familiar with perspective-bending images that can either be seen as a candlestick or two faces, or a young woman's face looking away or an old woman's profile close up. Skylark's album *Once upon a Time* is like that. Experiencing it for the first time, one wonders: is it a choral recording with narration, or is it storytelling with incidental choral music?

Collegiate choral directors tend to devour choral recordings looking for one or more of three things: new repertoire, new interpretive ideas, or new (or at least newly-enacted) concepts of choral sound. So it is natural that those unfamiliar with Skylark's groundbreaking work in choral storytelling might approach this album similarly, perhaps anticipating a choral recording with a folktale theme. This album is much more than that, and it is most rewarding when experienced as storytelling with choral commentary.

Skylark's *Once upon a Time*, released in February 2020, takes two well-known folktales, the Grimm brothers' "Snow White" and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," and weaves each into a half-hour-plus sonic feast that intertwines

spoken word performance by Sarah Walker, a delightful variety of choral pieces and newly-composed choral connective tissue by composer Benedict Sheehan.

The stories, read with dramatic intimacy by Walker, are not the watered-down versions we've come to know from popular films, but are adaptations in contemporary American English of the European originals, with their stark yet ambiguous contrasts of light and dark, good and evil, compassion and cruelty. As each story proceeds, gems of the unaccompanied choral repertoire are so expertly placed along the plot line as to seem composed explicitly for those moments.

Each of the two stories opens with one of Vaughan Williams' *Three Shakespeare Songs*: "Snow White" with "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" and "The Little Mermaid" with "Full Fathom Five." As "Snow White" proceeds, all four movements of Poulenc's *Un soir de neige* are woven in, albeit not in their original order. Rather, they are deftly positioned to offer a surprisingly exact relevance to the plot points they accompany. Joining them are compositions by Rautavaara, Mäntyjärvi, and Pearsall, whose "Lay a Garland" attains a heartbreaking poignancy when it occurs. Rounding out these contributions is the Serbian

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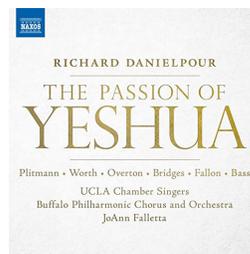
folksong “Fatiše kolo,” positioned as a triumphant paean after the death of the evil queen. “The Little Mermaid,” on the other hand, incorporates two sea-themed pieces by Veljo Tormis in addition to the Vaughan Williams, and tosses in Mäntyjärvi’s setting of “Double, double, toil and trouble” for the Sea Witch, as well as works by Bernstein and Lauridsen.

Perhaps the most remarkable contribution to the experience is also the most subtle: Benedict Sheehan composed no fewer than fourteen connective pieces that include new material as well as deftly rendered adaptations of melodic and harmonic material from the surrounding pieces of unaccompanied repertoire, resulting in an intricate tapestry that presents new delights at each successive listening. The combined results are truly astonishing in both delicacy and emotional impact.

Throughout the entire experience, Skylark’s singing is both dramatically wide-ranging and exquisitely nuanced. Much of the repertoire, and much of Sheehan’s writing as well, involves thick harmonic textures which require the precise tuning and finely shaded balances for which Skylark has rightly earned a reputation. Beyond that, the group portrays a staggering variety of moods, from distant and ethereal to violently threatening, to boisterously exuberant. There are exquisite solo passages from the ensemble’s members, and the pacing of the emotional trajectory contributes to the overall narrative arc.

If at all possible, either buy the physical CD or download the album from a source that includes the digital booklet, which iTunes does not provide. The texts, translations, and explanatory material exponentially increases the enjoyment.

—William Culverhouse, *Binghamton University*



Richard Danielpour:
The Passion of Yeshua
UCLA Chamber Singers,
Buffalo Philharmonic
Chorus and Orchestra
JoAnn Falletta,
conductor Naxos
8.559885-86
(2020; 1:43:00)

Richard Danielpour’s *The Passion of Yeshua* stands on the shoulders of passion oratorios by Bach, Handel, and Distler, yet contributes its own perspective to the traditional biblical narrative. The oratorio has been brought to life in a stunningly vibrant way through the leadership of JoAnn Falletta, with the exceptional UCLA Chamber Singers and Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra. Written in 2017, the piece is the culmination of 25 years of research, reflection, and inspiration from Danielpour, who writes, “As an American born of Middle Eastern, Iranian parentage, I was fortunate to be part of an extended family that embraced the rich heritage of both the Jewish and Christian traditions.... There was no ‘place’ for my beliefs, and so what I did over the years was to build a temple or cathedral in sound. Music is, for me, a place where God resides.”¹

The Passion of Yeshua, says Danielpour, was deeply inspired by his love of the Bach *St. Matthew Passion*. He writes:

The great *St. Matthew Passion* of Bach was a pivotal work in my life. I heard it for the first time at 17, and hearing it was for me one of the most substantive confirmations of my belief that I was put on this earth

¹ Richard Danielpour as quoted in *The Passion of Yeshua* album liner notes.

to write music. This monumental work remained a touchstone for me over many years, so it is not surprising that when I began to think about *The Passion of Yeshua* structurally, which is how I first conceive of any work, I found myself returning to this magnificent music of Bach. The harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and timbral languages of my work are markedly different from Bach's, but there are moments, particularly in the last scene, which in their own way, bow to the great master. 2

Danielpour's inspiration in Bach's passion setting can be seen first and foremost in the structure of the piece. The hour and forty-minute work is broken into two main sections, each featuring seven scenes. Both large sections end with a chorus movement, and feature chorale movements throughout. As Danielpour states, the final movement of the work is an homage to J. S. Bach, featuring fugal imitation which combine to parallel pairs of voices. The focus on the number seven, seen in Jewish mysticism as a number of completion, carries throughout the piece: the structure, number of soloists, number of chorus movements, and number of movements featuring the two female soloists.

In most passion settings, as in the canonic gospels, the role of women is minimal, if mentioned at all. Refreshingly, *The Passion of Yeshua* places a significant importance on the role of women. Danielpour's setting features the roles of Mary (Miryam) and Mary Magdalene (Miryam Magdala), sung by a mezzo-soprano a soprano soloist, respectively. Danielpour writes on the inclusion of these characters, "I wanted these women to have a powerful and central place in the musical commentary related to the narrative, and in doing so, give them a voice."³

² Richard Danielpour as quoted in *The Passion of Yeshua* album liner notes.

³ Richard Danielpour as quoted in *The Passion of Yeshua* album liner notes.

Rather than bystanders in a male-dominated story, the women in this setting are omnipresent Messianic prophets. Their texts, primarily coming from the Old Testament, serve as the heralds of Yeshua's sacrifice as the completion of scripture. The rich, lamenting timbre of J'Nai Bridges as she pleads in the garden of Gethsemane in Scene 6 and announces Joseph's (Kefa's) denial in Scene 9 defines the heartbreak of Mary in a new light. Hila Plitmann's aria before Pilate portrays Mary Magdalene as the most devoted of disciples. Plitmann's and Bridges's duet at the foot of the cross in Scene 12 is masterfully sung; the accuracy of intonation in stark accompaniment and dissonance presents a uniquely haunting image of the crucifixion.

The Passion of Yeshua is a new passion setting for a new era. The use of Hebrew texts, chant, and tonalities like the phrygian dominant scale used in sacred Hebrew and klezmer music highlight the cultural ancestry of this story. English narration and dialogue allow listeners to enter the story from a contemporary perspective and be transported back in time. It is a combination of Judaism and Christianity: "This oratorio is, among other things, an attempt to help me, and others, understand more fully the connection of Jesus of Nazareth to Jewish history."⁴ Though traditional in structure, the work is modern in its use of harmony, orchestration, and rhythmic complexity. The Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus and the UCLA Chamber Singers rose to the challenge of this work, giving a dramatic and expressive performance. I recommend this album, and this piece, to anyone who wishes to experience a fresh take on the passion story.

—Angelica Dunsavage, *Tennessee State University*

⁴ Richard Danielpour as quoted in *The Passion of Yeshua* album liner notes.