

Tuesday Musical: Chanticleer in Akron (July 27)

by Timothy Robson



Chanticleer, the legendary all-male vocal ensemble, appeared on Tuesday Musical's series at E.J. Thomas Hall on July 27. Founded in 1978, the ensemble presented one of their trademark eclectic programs, in which a Renaissance motet by William Byrd could bump up against Burton Lane's pop song *On a Clear Day*, or a commissioned work might transition to a gospel song. Part of their first post-pandemic tour, this was their first performance in Northeast Ohio under new music director Tim Keeler, who had previously sung countertenor in the group.

Face masks were required during the performance at the request of Chanticleer, but social distancing in the seating of Thomas Hall was abandoned. Most of the audience crowded into the orchestra section. With the current spread of the COVID Delta variant, it was unsettling.

The seventeen works on the program moved efficiently — this report only touches on some of the highlights. The concert opened with a newly commissioned work by American composer Ayanna Woods, *close[r], now*, to celebrate Chanticleer's first tour in over a year. The text is from a March 2020 *Los Angeles Times* editorial about why arts organizations should “close, now.” The words are broken into their component

phonemes, then reassembled harmonically until they once again form words. The text and music are ultimately optimistic that normal life will come back.

As the piece was ending, Chanticleer re-positioned themselves for Claudio Monteverdi's "Lauda Jerusalem," from the *Vespers of 1610*, for two choirs and tenor soloist. The texture was thick, and the three components sounded too homogenized. Tenor Andrew Van Allsburg was overpowered by the mass of sound.

Scottish composer James MacMillan's Advent motet *O Radiant Dawn* was much more successful, in its chordal, yet sophisticated harmonic style. Augusta Read Thomas was represented by two works. *The Rewaking* (text by William Carlos Williams) speaks of the arrival of spring, here as a metaphor for the revival of our world after its year-long closure. *The Bird her punctual music brings* (text by Emily Dickinson), written for Chanticleer, is ecstatically varied in its musical twists and turns, highlighted by virtuosic vocal imitations of birds.

Birdsong was an organizing theme in the second half of the program. Besides Thomas's work, Clément Janequin's Renaissance representation of birds was embedded in his part song entitled simply *Le chant des oiseaux*. It seemed that the birds might overstay their welcome, but Steven Sametz's gorgeous *Birds of Paradise* was a standout, with its Christina Rossetti text and musical depiction of birds ascending to "the paradise of God." This was a case where the complex texture and sophisticated structure rewarded the listener.

Among the popular favorites on the program, Gene Puerling's arrangement of Burton Lane's *On a Clear Day* was optimistic and jazzy. And a former Chanticleer music director came into the mix with Joseph Jennings' arrangement of Richard Evans' smooth, bossa nova-flavored *Journey to Recife*, where the singers brilliantly imitated the sounds of a Latin percussion section.

As an encore Chanticleer offered one of their most famous and beloved selections, a touching arrangement of the American folk song *Shenandoah* by Marshall Bartholomew and James Erb.

The concert was rapturously received by the audience, and one can be very grateful for Chanticleer's return. But after my own experiences hearing Chanticleer quite a number of times over several decades in venues around the United States, I felt that they are still emerging, under the guidance of their new music director, from their enforced pandemic hiatus.

The usually well-oiled Chanticleer music machine seemed a bit rusty, and the somewhat dry and unforgiving acoustics of Thomas Hall did not enhance the sound. There were times when individual voices did not fully blend with the group, and Chanticleer's

normal ensemble precision was sometimes not quite there. I have full confidence, however, that they'll soon get their groove back.

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