

Composers Guild & Cleveland Chamber Choir join forces (Apr. 2)

by Daniel Hathaway



When the Cleveland Composers Guild added the requirement of writing a vocal piece to its collegiate composition contest in 2019 and generated only a single entry — impressive as that piece was — the idea was born for dedicating an entire year to vocal music.

The choral side of that theme came to fruition on Sunday, April in Drinko Hall at Cleveland State University, when the Guild collaborated with Cleveland Chamber Choir in a program designed and led by CCC acting director Gregory Ristow that successfully combined new pieces by Northeast Ohio composers with existing works, and in one case brought a new wrinkle to a well-known choral cycle.

That cycle is *Frostiana*, six settings of texts by Randall Thompson that perfectly match the poetry of Robert Frost and have become standards in the choral repertoire. The new wrinkle on Sunday was *New Frostiana*, a set of songs that included Thompson's original setting of the inspirational text "Choose Something Like a Star," and added Margaret Bonds' new setting of "The Pasture" for solo soprano (Jacqueline Josten), as well as Geoffrey Peterson's setting of "Stopping by Woods" for unaccompanied mixed voices (the well-known original was for male voices and piano).

It takes a certain amount of *chutzpah* to re-set “Stopping by Woods,” but Peterson pulled it off with a piece that features fresh harmonies and makes a haunting thing out of the poem’s final words, “and miles to go before I sleep.”

The concert began strikingly with Chen Yi’s *Spring Dreams*, which deployed the singers in a wide arc on and off the stage and gave them little nonsense syllables to sing. The program, arranged into seasonal quadrants, continued with Erik Charnofsky’s *Spring*, undergirded by the composer’s bravura piano score, which he played brilliantly.

Inna Onfrei’s *Rain in Summer* and Cara Haxo’s *Sea Grass*, first performances of works by Guild members, made fine impressions and additions to the choral repertory. Ryan Charles Ramer’s *Rules* closed out the first half with a brief setting of words by Terry Stokes.

The unexpected passing of longtime Composers Guild member Delores Wilson inspired the addition of her own spring-themed piece to the program. Her setting of a slightly variant version of e.e. cummings’ *O Sweet, Spontaneous Earth* brought the feeling of Erik Satie’s *Gymnopédies* into the program after intermission.

CCG members Mark Nowakwski and William Rayer closed the afternoon with their settings of *Ave Maria* and *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Rayer’s piece was high-spirited and gave pianist Javier González a real workout.

Since programs like this always need a bit of non-thematic filler, that was supplied by Ristow, who chose items by Jonathan Dove (two pieces from *Passing of the Year*), Gabriel Fauré (his gorgeous *Le Ruisseau* for women’s voices and piano), Margaret Bonds (*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*), Vicente Lusitano (*Ave, Spes Nostra*), Pavel Chesnokov (*Salvation is Created*), and Amy Beach (the little benediction *Peace I leave with you*).

Well-conceived, adroitly chosen, and beautifully performed, this program was a testament to good planning and careful execution. A fine model for future collaborations as well as a fun way to spend a sunny spring afternoon.

Photo: Amber Rogers

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