

Music in Victoria

Chamber Singers at 35

University of Victoria Chamber Singers
University of Victoria Chamber Singers Alumni Choir
Bruce More, conductor
St. Aidan's United Church
April 26, 2008

By Deryk Barker

"The only thing better than singing is more singing."

I have no doubt that everybody present in St. Aidan's United Church on Saturday evening, whether a current or former member of the UVic Chamber Singers or a mere auditor, would have agreed wholeheartedly with Ella Fitzgerald,

Saturday's concert was a celebration of thirty five years of the UVic Chamber singers and their conductor, the redoubtable Bruce More. Thirty-five years is half a lifetime (precisely half of the biblical "three score and ten") ago; few, if any, of the current Chamber Singers can have been alive when the original incarnation sang its first notes back in 1973 - when Richard Nixon was in the White House, Pierre Trudeau in Sussex Drive and Leonid Brezhnev in the Kremlin.

Most of Saturday's programme featured the current Chamber Singers and included a number of Chamber Singers "party pieces" - such as R. Murray Schafer's Epitaph for Moonlight. Time prevents detailed commenting on every piece, but each one demonstrated the attributes for which the Chamber Singers are now known worldwide: stunning accuracy, clean diction, meticulously observed dynamics and frequently gorgeous tone production.

After a briefly polyglot opening, culminating in Rossini's *la Passegiatta* - without knowing the text or subject it is hard to say how well Rossini conveyed it: he was, after all, the capable of making the medieval hymn *Stabat Mater* sound like a comic opera - the opening half of the programme had a distinctly French accent, with music by Messiaen, Debussy and Lili Boulanger.

All of which sounded, in their very different ways, inimitably French, full of delicious harmonies; but, for me, the real discovery was *Soir sue la plaine* by the tragically-short-lived Lili Boulanger, younger sister of Nadia.

This was performed by the Massed Alumni Choir - it was only when they moved onto the stage that we realised how many "ringers" were in the audience - with pianist Rachael Grahn.

The spectacular opening soprano solo was marvellously sung by Kristen Birley, but the central focus must be on the choral singing, which was at times almost overwhelming. The music is delectable and the singing was...well, let us just say that this was probably the finest choir of its size ever assembled in Victoria.

The second half opened with the Massed Alums ranged around the audience performing Gregg Smith's Navajo Prayer, a round based on the text "I walk in beauty" and illustrating it to perfection. After this the current Chamber Singers dazzled us with a wide-ranging variety of pieces including the aforementioned Schafer piece, a very jovial Feller form *Fortune* by Harry Somers, Eric Whitacre's *Sleep* - although as the choir was singing "As I surrender myself to sleep" fortissimo I could imagine someone in the next room shouting "with this racket going on?"

More invited those of alumni who "thought they could handle it" to join in a performance of another piece whose title and author I should recall, as it has been performed at every Chamber Singers Christmas concert I've attended; it's the one in which musical terms (piano, pianissimo) are illustrated by singing them in the appropriate manner. You could tell that this was an old favourite by the way in which the alumni had no need of the music and joined in all the gestures in perfect synchronisation.

Finally, the Massed Alumni Choir sang More's arrangement of Lord, I Know I Been Changed a highly appropriate ending: few of the singers who have passed through his hands in the last three-and-a-half decades could deny that the experience was a life-changing one.

In the sixteen years (this week) that I have been reviewing Music in Victoria, I can think of nobody in this town who has done more to raise the level of choral singing - with the possible exception of Bruce's wife, Connie; and it seems only fitting that UVic has decided to honour the couple with a Bruce and Connie More Scholarship.

An evening to revel in.

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