

SONGS OF SHAKESPEARE - JULY 17, 2006

The German poet Friedrich Rückert proved remarkably enticing to composers who created more than 9,000 musical settings of his texts. Yet he cannot hold a candle to William Shakespeare in this regard, whose 20,000 musical settings dwarf all other authors by a wide margin. That remarkable total continues to grow, as tonight's concert includes the premiere of several 21st-century compositions.

Kelly Crandell's as yet unpublished *Blow, Blow Thou Winter Wind* won the 2001 choral competition sponsored by Chanticleer, the internationally renowned San Francisco chamber choir. Crandell sets this text from As You Like It in "A B A B A" form, with a lively tune for the "A" sections which he initially sets as a round for solo voices. Listen for the slower "B" sections, however, where poignant harmonies provide the setting for the winter texts of the title. The second "B" setting of this melody offers the most striking harmonies of the piece, with a wonderfully evocative setting for the word "freeze" in the tenor part. It is a half-step removed from the "jolly" of the female voices. However, the jolly, holly, folly and loving carry the day, as Crandell concludes with a return to the "A" section's high-spirited opening tune.

Matthew Harris sets *It was a Lover and his Lass* against type. Instead of the typically lively setting of this text (again from As You Like It), he offers a more gentle, contrapuntal version. He opens with the always effective technique of an opening melody (in the women's voices) which then becomes the accompaniment to the main theme, given to the tenors. But Harris also skillfully weaves variants of this opening melody for the women into all parts throughout the piece.

According to the 2001 New Grove Dictionary, **William Mathias** became "one of the most significant 20th-century Welsh composers." The popularity of his psalm setting for the marriage of Prince Charles of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981 led to numerous commissions on both sides of the Atlantic. Mathias wrote *Under the Greenwood Tree* (yet another excerpt from As You Like It) in 1978, as the first of a set of "Eight Shakespeare Songs, Op. 80." His penchant for metric and rhythmic complexity is on full display. He changes meter five times in the first nine bars, including the piano introduction and the first choral entrance. This piano introduction also serves as an interlude between verses, and displays his love of lively, jazz-oriented syncopations. Such syncopations also dominate a later, powerful choral passage of canonic imitation between women and men, with the entrances coming only two beats apart.

Bryan Johansen's *Mistress and the Bee*, commissioned by the Repertory Singers, receives its world premiere performance tonight. This piece combines two texts (*O Mistress Mine* from Twelfth Night and *Where the Bee Sucks* from The Tempest) and Johansen sets them in strongly contrasting styles. *O Mistress Mine* features slow-moving counterpoint and poignant choral harmonies, especially when combined with the light and occasionally haunting piano accompaniment. The most striking harmonies, however, occur in the introduction (and later interlude) from *Where the Bee Sucks*, where Johansen's complex chords suggest a cluster of bees. The motivic imitation and counterpoint remain constant, but now in a quick tempo honeycombed with lively syncopations.

For his third of "Three Shakespeare Songs" written in 2003, **Carl Nygard** creates a setting unlike any other on tonight's program. He sets *Hey Nonny, Nonny* in a delightful, blues-oriented pop style. Nygard establishes a marvelous contrast between the standard rock 'n' roll triplet accompaniment in the piano - straight out of the 1950s - and sophisticated jazz-like syncopations for the chorus. Listen for the syncopations in both the melody and choral accompaniments, against a rich backdrop of pop harmony. Though the text is secular (from Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing), Nygard also works for the music ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. It's perhaps no coincidence that his blues harmonies and lively rhythms result in the closest approach to Gospel of any work in the concert.

According to Webster's 1995 Encyclopedia of literature, the sonnet remains "unique among poetic forms in Western Literature" because its appeal for major poets lasted longer than any other - seven centuries. Petrarch, Shakespeare, Elizabeth Browning and Rilke all contributed to its illustrious heritage. The most distinctive feature of the Elizabethan sonnet appears at the conclusion. After three quatrains of various rhyme schemes, each sonnet closes with a rhymed couplet - a feature **James Bassi** highlights to great effectiveness in "Harpsonnets." In each of the three Shakespeare sonnets, Bassi sets this final couplet as a

sophisticated musical rhyme, distinguishing it from earlier material. After lighthearted, unpredictable rhythms in the opening choral and harp dialogue of *Shall I Compare*, Bassi begins both lines of the final couplet with similar rhythmic patterns and a new sustained-note texture. *How oft* opens in a more powerful, syncopated style, contrasting with the gentle setting for the final couplet. And the final couplet of *Devouring Time* also establishes contrast, as Bassi emphasizes the complex rhyme ('wrong' and 'young') with different chords yet similar opening rhythms. The strong dissonance, heavier textures and greater drama of this finale conclude the first half of the concert.

INTERMISSION

Morten Lauridsen's "Les Chansons des Roses" provides contrast on several levels. The poems by Rilke offer the only non-Shakespearean texts of the evening. And coming after the robust conclusion of Bassi's "Harpsonnets," Lauridsen also writes tonight's softest and most gentle settings. Rilke wrote a series of poems on different aspects of a single subject - roses. Lauridsen mirrors this unity with similar musical motives linking the individual songs. *Contre Qui, Rose* is the slowest and most poignant of the set. It opens with the central motive of the cycle - repeated notes and the rise of a fourth - which also appears in varied form to open the next selection *La Rose Complete*. The women's voices gradually extend the rising interval, leading to the most powerful choral climax (and the highest pitches) in the entire set, depicting the metaphor of the rose as "all of life." The entrance of the piano offers new colors in the gentle finale, *Dirait-on*, often set in a simpler, folksong style. Lauridsen's lovely settings of Rilke's rose poetry remain one of the most requested of all publications by the influential firm of Theodore Presser.

Anyone familiar with Schubert's setting of *Who is Sylvia?* will find only one connection with this piece by **Matthew Harris**: the text (from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*). That's it, and that's all. Harris ranges both before Schubert (in pseudo-Baroque profundity) and well beyond, into 20th-century soul, and all in great fun. Listen for the exaggerated, syncopated accents of the choral accompaniment to the tremendous solo line with its own exaggeration of those great blues clichés, the flat third and the flat seventh pitches. In wonderful mock-Handel seriousness, the final cadence offers not one but two Baroque clichés: a typical Baroque suspension for the chorus, against the picardy Major-third conclusion for the wonderfully stylistic solo line. Harris writes a great pop setting, with not a serious note to be found anywhere.

In *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare briefly adopts the text of a gifted contemporary born in the same year, Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe's poem "The Passionate Shepherd and his Love," published posthumously in 1599, is an Elizabethan marriage proposal - and **Kenneth Neufeld** composed this wonderfully rich musical setting for a wedding. As in the opening, Neufeld often sets one prominent melody against chordal accompaniment in the other three voices. The bass section features the melody in the opening passage, and listen for its return later in the piece against more complex harmonies. The light counterpoint includes occasional jazz-tinged passing harmonies in this lush and expressive setting.

The Repertory Singers' composer-in-residence, **Craig Kingsbury**, revised his 2004 composition *A Midsummer Song* specifically for tonight's concert. Kingsbury's flair for light textures coupled with metrical complexity dominates the opening section. He sets this text from *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 10/8 and frequently changes meter, often placing the delicate piano interjections in a different meter than the chorus. The middle section provides contrast with a slower tempo, simple 4/4 meter, and colorful modal harmonies (with an emphasis on the Lydian raised fourth). His new conclusion returns to the lively, syncopated spirit of opening material, but now in 6/8 meter, concluding the concert with reconciliation ("Puck, we will make amends ere long") and a wish for a "...good night unto all."

Program notes by Ed Wight