

Recording Reviews

Peter J. Duroow, Editor

I Have Had Singing

USC Thornton Chamber Singers

Jo-Michael Scheibe, conductor

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If one could recreate a choral collegiate concert experience in a recorded album, it would be *I Have Had Singing*. Many tracks end with audience applause, and you can hear sneezing and coughing in the middle of some performances, indicating that the recordings are live. Significant liner notes are devoted to each piece or collection of pieces on the album. With liner notes as your program and the sounds of the audience and applause as your fellow attenders, it is as if you are there in the concert hall, only now you have the luxury of pausing the album to slip into your pajamas, grab a glass of wine, and check on your midnight snack—which happens to be baked kale, if you are being good.

This collection of mostly—if not entirely—live performances by one of the leading collegiate choirs in the world includes 33 selections and 2 hours and 24 minutes of quality choral compositions appropriate for an advanced collegiate choral chamber ensemble and features both European and North American composers. Collegiate directors looking for modern repertoire will find a treasure trove in this album. The only pre-1900 selection is Johannes Brahms' *O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf*, and most of the other composers featured are still living.

Though dominated by male composers, the album features a sole female composer, Abbie Betinis. In *Cedit, Hyems*, Betinis sets the first text as a struggle between darkness and light. Beginning with gestural sighs and disjointed conversations between choir and violin, the composition creates a dismal duality. As the text brightens, so does the musical setting. Like a steam locomotive slowly churning as it leaves the station, the singers imitate each other, using the percussive sounds of the text to paint the picture of the skies growing bright and breaking the darkness. All the while, the ongoing darkness of the chorus part provides a profound backdrop and substance to the second text that celebrates Love winning over the dreariness of winter. The work of Abbie Betinis stands up to the quality of even the most prolific choral composers on the album.

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If you are looking for repertoire with performing forces other than voices or piano, you will find two on the album. In addition to Betinis' piece with violin, you may be pleasantly surprised by the movie-like sound world of Ola Gjeilo's *The Lake Isle*, composed for 8-part choir, guitar, piano, and string quartet and premiered by the USC Thornton Chamber Singers in October 2012.

The ensemble's choral production is consistent from Dale Warland's *Always Singing* through the rest of the CD, despite vast changes in personnel over the years. Exceptions include David Dickau's *O Nata Lux*, where the heaviness of soprano and mezzo voices contribute to a less blended texture and Seth Houston's *The Reapers All with Their Sharp Sickles*, which has a distinctly brighter tone. The consistency of tone at times seems to take precedence over linguistic color, especially in the German and French languages. For example, exquisite lyricism and tone contrasted with great attention to shorter articulations in the "Amen" section are accompanied by the lack of clarity and integrity of the vowels and consonants internal to the phrase in Brahms' *O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf*. The brightness, lightness, and phrasal stress of the French language are best represented in Edgar Cosma's *Les Amours des Poètes*. If you are a fan of Czech composer Petr Eben, you can bask in both *Sonnengesang* and *Zauberspruch, den Liebsten zu beschwören*, even if the clarity of the language is sometimes lost in favor of musical articulation, intonation, and choral tone.

The way Henk Badings set the texts in *Trois Chansons Bretonnes* demands shifts in colors and sound, even with an ensemble of such consistent production, making this piece one of

the most interesting performances on the album. Congratulations to Jo-Michael Scheibe for choosing this cycle and to both him and the USC Thornton Chamber Singers for their authentic interpretation. May the work be added to the repertoire of nearly all advanced collegiate choirs, and may the consistency of this performance be the standard by which all future performances compare.

I cried upon listening to Stephen Paulus' *Hymn to the Eternal Flame*. The Chamber Singers may have been the last collegiate choir to record this hopeful song about becoming one with the Divine before Paulus passed away last October. What a tribute! And after the serious content of most of the album, you might enjoy a pleasant chuckle as this collegiate choir performs the traditional nursery rhyme setting of *Oh Dear! What can the matter be?* by Gail Kubik.

The album sets the example of championing regional composers, including two pieces by San Francisco composer David Conte and a piece each by Seth Houston, Nicholas McKaig, and Mack Wilberg, all USC alumni. One quarter of the album is devoted to the work of composer Morten Lauridsen, a professor of composition at USC for more than 40 years. As one who toils for the sake of choral performance and composition, I found the performances of this beloved American composer, sung by the top ensemble from his university, to be a profound inspiration.

While not necessarily my favorite interpretations, the magical combination of home composer with his institution's performance speaks profoundly, especially when Lauridsen collaborates as pianist for *Sure on this Shining Night*. To my ears the piano seems at odds with the chorus—at

times, even pedantic and too active for the mood indicated in the score. Perhaps my ears have become accustomed to interpreting it entirely differently, and since the composer is performing, I think it would behoove all conductors and pianists to learn from Lauridsen's compositional intent by way of how he interprets his own piano part. What a great privilege to learn from the source!

When again will such a fine advanced collegiate choir put us in the "living room" of the most performed American composer and serve as an example of a very informed interpretation of the composer's work? So grab your glass of wine, kale, and liner notes; and allow yourself to be transported beyond your living room and the USC concert hall to the place choral music is supposed to take us.

—Jeremiah Selvey

