

With a Poet's Eye

FRANKLIN: *With a Poet's Eye*; ROREM: *Pilgrim Strangers*; SHEARER: *Ages of Day (2)*, *Mushroom*; HAWLEY: *Seven Madrigals (2)*; CONTE: *Ave Maria*; KELLER: *Ave Maria*; SAMETZ: *Oh llama de amor viva!*

Chanticleer—Chanticleer 8804 (Allegro) 70 minutes

A great deal of well-written, perfectly approachable new choral music is being produced. Most of it is not performed or heard as widely as it ought to be. Anyone who has heard any of this group's past releases knows that they are doing much to redress the problem.

Cary John Franklin's *With a Poet's Eye* goes Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* one better. Moussorgsky takes his inspiration directly from Hartmann's art, Franklin sets poetry inspired by particular works of art in London's Tate Gallery. 'The Uncertainty of the Poet', a humorous piece with a jittery rhythmic style, is one of the highlights of Franklin's set along with 'Coming from Evening Church' which uses hazy dissonance to create a reflective context for the poem. Soloist Matthew Thompson sings with meaning and with a not inappropriate detachment.

Ned Rorem's *Pilgrim Strangers* (1984), written for The King's Singers, is one of the most affecting pieces on this disc. Taken from Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days*, the prose text recounts the horrors Whitman experienced as a volunteer in the Union Army's hospitals as well as his recollections of the day Lincoln was assassinated. Some of these same texts were used in Ken Burns's award-winning documentary *The Civil War*. Rorem's music is definitely tailored to the particular sound and skills of The King's Singers, but Chanticleer's performance shows real sensitivity to the text. In the final section (depicting a musical performance for wounded soldiers), Rorem interpolates the Whitman poem from which this piece takes its name into the narrative, to devastating effect.

The style of Allen Shearer, a Prix de Rome recipient, is a bit less approachable than the others. The selections from *Ages of Day*, 'Noon' and 'Dusk', his own texts, are in a dense and chromatic style that is aggressive in the former but more reflective in the latter. Shearer's sense of humor is evident in *Mushrooms*, from 1985. While using the same basic style as in *Ages of Day*, Shearer also asks the voices to imitate instruments (especially a muted trumpet-like effect) in keeping with the lighthearted spirit of the piece.

William Hawley wrote his *Seven Madrigals*, poems by Torquato Tasso, for Chanticleer in 1986. Two of these, 'Vita de la mia vita' and 'Io son la Primavera' are represented here. While 'Vita' is written in a style somewhat reminiscent of Renaissance polyphony (but with a modern harmonic palette),

'Primavera' has a lush harmonic setting, suggestive of the style one associates with The King's Singers, as in the Rorem piece.

The two short settings of the *Ave Maria* by David Conte and Mark Keller are influenced by early polyphony: Conte's in the use of open fifths at cadences, and Keller's in the use of the *Ave Maria* plainchant. Keller's setting, with its quartal harmonies and serene character, is especially effective.

Steven Sametz's *Oh llama de amor viva!* is the longest and most varied piece here. It is also the most dramatic and persuasive. It is subtitled "A Mystical Vision of St John of the Cross", referring to 16th Century Carmelite reformer Juan de la Cruz, who was imprisoned and beaten by his fellow Carmelites for 19 months for his progressive views. Sametz's music runs the gamut from uncompromisingly graphic at the beginning where Juan's beatings are depicted, to the transcendent beauty and frank eroticism of his vision. The first text (after a brief non-verbal opening) is set in a way that very much reminded me of Poulenc's 'Quem vidistis pastores dicites' (Christmas motet). However, it progresses much like the other works on this program: primarily diatonic, but with a liberal use of dissonance. It is a very moving and satisfying piece to end with.

Even the least of these pieces would be given short shrift were it not for Chanticleer's virtuosity and artistry. They command a large variety of dynamics and colors, and their blend and intonation are wondrous. Surely these works (most written for or commissioned by Chanticleer) could have no finer proponents. Chanticleer, and choral groups like them, are a significant part of the future of the choral art in America. We can only hope that they will continue to commission and perform works of this quality.

□ BOWER