

Lindsay Koob, in American Record Guide, July/August, 2004

### ***Millennium: Choral Music of Today***

David Eicher, org & p; South Bend Chamber Singers/ Nancy Menk

Pro Organo 7162—69 minutes

Here is a stimulating assortment of works by five highly regarded contemporary composers—three of them American—skillfully realized by an outstanding American choir.

The program begins with well-known Scottish composer James MacMillan's *Cantos Sagrados*. A sad and disturbing work, it sets three modern poems recounting some of the endless atrocities committed in Latin America. We shudder at the naked, nameless, murdered body pulled from a river; we extol a guard's compassionate touch as he asks forgiveness from the prisoner he is preparing for execution by firing squad; we shake our heads at the supreme irony of the gentle *Virgin of Guadalupe* as patron deity to the vicious Spanish Conquistadors. These passages in English are intermittently set against serenely beautiful, grief-stricken lines from the Latin Requiem Mass. The composer achieves tremendous tension between such quieter passages and gripping sections of tense, angry music. This organ-supported piece revolted me at first, but repeated listening confirmed that it works as intended. Only in ugly music can an ugly world be truly reflected. But he makes its harsh lesson bearable with the rarefied beauty attendant on divine solace and promise.

The works of William Hawley have attracted the attention of top choirs everywhere. Among the shorter pieces here, we get two lovely miniatures from him: a truly heavenly 'In Paradisum', in Latin and 'Celia', a delightful piece with piano setting a 17th Century English love poem. Another short gem is Romanian composer György Urban's jazzy and exuberant 'Mundi Renovatio'.

Perhaps my favorite piece here is a gorgeous setting of the classic Magnificat text in the King James Version from Frank Ferko. His music has earned the favor of choirs all over America and abroad; you must hear his *Hildegard Motets* if you get the chance. This piece, with organ, is notable for its simple, chant-like lines expressing Mary's quiet ecstasy in contrast to more colorful writing that evokes the glory of the annunciation. Not a trace of tension or ugliness in this one.

The final and longest piece is *To a Long Loved Love*, a seven-movement cycle by American sorceress Libby Larsen. Scored for choir and string quartet, it is heard here in its premiere concert performance from 1999. Setting the utterly honest and emotionally sensitive poetry of Madeleine L'Engle, these pieces explore the matter of long-term committed love in all its comfort, joy, fear, and uncertainty. While their overriding impression is positive and uplifting, moments of doubt and tension and even loneliness arise, as the imperfections of any human relationship are addressed with the deep and startling insight born of a woman's intuition. Any married couple could benefit from hearing it together. Larsen's treatment of the texts is magical, and the interaction of choir and string quartet is most eloquent. Only a woman could have written this music.

The splendid South Bend Chamber Singers offer consistently rich-toned and technically secure choral artistry in these often difficult selections. Three of these works were written specifically for them. They are captured in excellent sound. We get full texts, and the program notes are well done.

KOOB