

C4: The Choral Composer/Conductor Collective: “1 on 1: Music for Solo Instrument and Choir”



November 2014 marks the beginning of C4: The Choral Composer/Conductor Collective's tenth season; it is an important and happy milestone for this unique choral group. The first program of their 2014-2015 season was exciting and rewarding: marked by C4's now familiar musical integrity and intelligent repertoire, this season's opening held the happily unsurprising promise of the group's continued excellence.

Since 2004, The Choral Composer/Conductor Collective has pursued a unique mission sustained by a unique identity. All C4 members are musicians who sing and – or compose and – or conduct. C4 features only music composed within the last two and a half decades, most of it by C4 composers. Typically, every concert contains at least one New York or world premiere. Over the years, C4 members have come and gone as responsibilities and opportunities have necessitated their moving away from New York City.

The growing number of C4 “alums” spread out all over the United States and beyond has increased the musical breadth and depth of the group's reach; in both repertoire and

reputation, C4's vision is international, creating and reinforcing the cultural mix of influences and traditions that increasingly marks its repertoire. Simultaneously, the self-governing collective manages not merely its own programming, performances and arrangements with guest musicians, but also community and educational outreach, artistic mentorship endeavors and innovative collaboration with creative artists in other fields.

This season's over-arching theme, as explained in the always helpful program notes, is music that reflect(s) the idea of number in some way." In this first concert, "1 on 1: Music for Solo Instruments and Choir," the focus was on pieces with one choir and one musical instrument. What better way to begin a season exploring numbers in music than with a work inspired by Johann Sebastian Bach?

C4 composer Timothy Brown's *Take Me Bach*, premiered on this evening, is a delightful work. Its purpose is to explore some aspects of Bach's music as it has endured within the cacophony of contemporary noise and music overloads: Brown describes himself in the program notes as "a seriously confused contemporary composer" who is trying to "translate" Bach's great voice. Led by a solo clarinet that itself seems to wander in confusion, the choral singing in *Take Me Bach* dances on a constantly shifting ground of funniness, wit, irony and intelligence. The wordlessness of the work constitutes a superior format for conveying a complete inability to rationally explain things. Instead, the singing locates itself on musical sounds, intonations, occasional syllables and "dah, dah, dahs" and focuses on the familiar prelude No. 22 in B-flat minor from Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier, Book I*.

Brown describes himself as meander(ing) between simplicity and complexity, fun and fury, angst and bliss. It's an accurate description. The choir sang with its typical precision and clarity; sections and individual voices within sections made the choir into several and then multiple instruments. The singers successfully carried seriousness when singing Bach's music and wit when playing those inheritances from Bach so familiar that they have become clichés; these tone and mood shifts are a good example of C4 singers' deftness of technique and musicianship. If Brown's work had a weakness, it was its occasional likeness to the endeavors of P.D.Q. Bach: P.D.Q.'s ability to deflate self-important musicological pretentiousness has always been valuable, but its presence in Brown's work dilutes the charming self-effacement of Brown's mission to use Bach to make sense of the ambient noise of our lives.

Brown's wordless work was followed by C4 member Lisa Whitson Burns' text-intense *Spectrum*. Inspired by contemporary American artist Ellsworth Kelly's *Spectrum V* (1969), now on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the collaborating team of Burns and contemporary American lyricist and poet Christopher Staskel has written a thirteen stanza music-poem designed to parallel, echo and interpret the thirteen panels of Kelly's piece, each a canvas of bright, unmodulated color in a spectrum sequence. Each individual stanza evokes a very particular color – the brownish-yellow of a bruised lemon, the unnatural transparent green of cellophane Easter grass, eggplant-dark old skin age spots, Pepto-Bismol pink – that is, in fact, disturbingly at odds with the optimism of Kelly's colors. The poetry is populated by unnerving snapshots – a choking cat, the fantasy of Julie Andrews' coked-up on the Austrian hillside, scuzz breath and urban, dog-marked yellow snow – that are well matched by the difficult and demanding dissonances of Burns' music.

In spite of these disturbing features, there are some passages of poetry and music that are pleasing for their lyricism, their delicacy, their tentative path towards possible melodic resolution; here, the vibraphone, played by guest artist Jonathan Singer, with its echoey, slidey sound, served as a constant reminder that the music exists on its own extended spectrum of tonal and melodic opposites. Other passages are rewarding because of the exceptionally deft partnership of text and music: in stanza 9, “You, you are chiclets,” the prickliness of conflict is matched by the sharp urgency of the music’s contrapuntal rhythms. The work’s conclusion, primarily, we want to leave an impression, drifts with some sense of relief into an unsettled quiet.

The work has much about it that is attractive and promising, but the obvious discordance between Kelly’s painterly, optimistic sunniness and the tense, angry, volatile Burns-Staskel anxiety makes *Spectrum* seem like something less than it could be: an exceptionally strong draft of a fine piece or a piece that will serve as a rehearsal for an even more successful work in the future.

The last piece of the first half of the program was non-C4 composer Christopher Marshall’s *Tihei, Mauri Ora!*, settings of Maori “anonymous chants originally intended for various rites and ceremonies from the native traditions,” including, here, baptism, war chants and sunset songs. The men of C4, singing in Maori, captured the tenderness, the energy, the drama and the primal sweep of these ancient chants. Marshall’s writing is a rich and heady blend of indigenous New Zealand music traditions and Western harmonies, rhythms and allusions; Nicolas Gallas’ beautiful clarinet provided a subtle bridge among cultures and eras. The men’s singing and music making – including stomping and thigh-clapping on the one hand, and magical, fantastic birdsong whistling on the other – built to a gorgeous conclusion.

The second half of the program opened with C4 composer Bettina Sheppard’s *The Day the Saucers Came*. C4 audiences familiar with Sheppard as composer, singer and conductor experienced a splendid treat in her cool and easy control of the Theremin, that exceptionally odd and disconcerting early electronic instrument. The work’s text by Neil Gaiman, British writer of fiction, poetry, graphic novels, comic books, and films, is a post-apocalyptic science-fiction account of vegetation death, linoleum melt, animals speaking in Assyrian and saucer-zombie-battling- gods set within a depressed, detached love poem: you – whom the poet addresses – didn’t notice the apocalypse because you were by the ‘phone waiting for me to call.’ Without turning either the chorus’ story-telling or the Theremin itself into laughable parodies of 1950’s and 1960’s grade B science fiction movies, Sheppard captures the quintessential weirdness of the situation.

In the program notes, she describes the work as an exercise in playful theatricality. She is too modest. Her writing intertwines the human voice and the Theremin’s otherworldliness exquisitely; her rhythm plays are complex and satisfying. Sheppard expands the Theremin’s usual evocation of science fiction to a more intellectually and artistically broad range that includes cosmic menace, earth-rooted spookiness and vaguely Pre-Raphaelite ethereality. *The Day the Saucers Came* is an elegant, self-deprecating little offering of science fantasy absurdity.

The next piece on the program was Lisa Bielawa’s 2004 *Lamentations for a City*. One of three works in the concert by non-C4 composers, *Lamentations* was also the most musically

traditional piece. Juxtaposing and interconnecting the ancient poet-prophet Jeremiah's anguished and passionate description of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE with the hemorrhaging web media for crisis reports from cities all over the world, Bielawa's choral writing claims as its ancestry both European romanticism and twentieth century composers such as Britten, Copland and Bernstein. Bielawa brings together intimate delicacy and symphonic drama as seamlessly as she joins the tragedies of ancient cities and modern ones. The English horn alternated in function as announcer and mirror. Karen Birch Blundell's extended solo in the middle of the piece was breathtaking: she made her English horn an instrument of remarkable expressivity, subtle nuance and elegant virtuosity, at once frankly displayed and humbly owned.

Themes of lament continued in the next work, *Shar Ki Ri* by Andrea Clearfield. This work for women singers and vibraphone is an excerpt from Clearfield's 2012 cantata *Tse Go La (At the Threshold of This Life)*, a large-scale work built on Tibetan indigenous folk music and focusing on the devastating contemporary threats to ancient Tibetan civilization and culture. This beautiful piece combined Tibetan musical traditions with familiar western motifs, never descending into facile sentimentality. The vibraphone especially, combined with the chant-feel of much of the women's singing, brought monasticism and modernity into a single sound. The final glance to the future in *Shar Ki Ri*'s conclusion was at once optimistic and contemplative. Before *Bubbles*, the final work of the program, C4 member Fahad Siadat addressed the audience with his characteristic vivaciousness and caring good cheer. He thanked colleagues, guest artists and supporters alike; he acknowledged C4's sense of delight in performing at Brooklyn's innovative and welcoming Galapagos Art Space; he informed the audience about C4's upcoming educational outreach initiatives, including a collaborative project for middle school composers with ComposerCraft, a seminar format class, now entering its fourth year, at the special music school and the Lucy Moses School at the Kaufman Music Center. His remarks were an important reminder that in addition to composing, workshopping and performing contemporary choral works, C4 is assuming a valuable role in the musical and educational life of New York City. For young students, the recognition and cultivation of their musical gifts will strengthen their futures; for their families, their schools and their neighborhoods, the display of their musical accomplishments will reinforce the place of the arts in civil society and will cultivate a diversely talented and responsible citizenry. The work of C4 in this area is imaginative and commendable.

Bubbles proved to be a perfect way to end the evening. The text, as C4 composer and *Bubbles* poet Bill Heigen, noted, is "an attempt to compare life with a bubble." Bubbles shimmer, float and fly; they bump into other bubbles (and things), and then, with a pop we imagine we hear, they're gone. Though *bubbles* contains a familiar *carpe diem* message, the music's exploration of particular moments of life—a bubble's and our own—by means of distinct, though often overlapping singing by choir sections, subsections, and choir divisions by gender as well as by constant changes of dynamics, rhythms, tones and keys makes the old dictum feel quite original.

The music alternates passages of intimacy and expansiveness, endearing silliness and stealth gravitas, memorable loveliness and shiny, transparent evanescence and loss. Conducting the lovely music with evident happiness, Siadat also made exuberant cascades of

bubbles with a bright blue bubble gun (as did dancer Anastasia Wiebe, perched like a quiet, good girl on a chair by Siadat, while some audience members blew bubbles, too). The piece – about bubbles! – ended with a great swell of choral glory.

From the opening *Take Me Bach* to the concluding *Bubbles*, the program successfully presented questions about the ways in which choral music can help us make sense of daily life, both global and personal. Some of the program's subjects were universal and huge: violence, destruction, loss and grief opposed by baptism, promise, tenderness and hope. Some subjects were personal and internal: individual perceptions of reality jostled with psychological thorniness and goofy flights of science fiction fantasy.

Sometimes with words we understand and sometimes with words we don't, and sometimes entirely wordlessly, choral music is important for us because it helps us hear ourselves. The hearing gives us both recognition and revelation. In addition, choral music helps us negotiate our responses to the world around us: it gives us useful ways to understand everything from grief to anger, hope to possibility, pleasure and satisfaction to glee and hilarity.

This is all C4's territory. They bring to it their own spirit of collaboration and their commitment to contemporary musical insights, vocabulary and exploration. C4's mission has not changed over the last ten years, but because of the material they choose to work with, the mission is always new and fresh.

This program was a fine beginning to the next ten years.

C4: The Choral Composer/Conductor Collective presents "1 on 1: Music for Solo Instruments and Choir" (November 13, 2014)

Galapagos Art Space, 16 Main Street, in Brooklyn

For tickets: 718-222-8500

For more information: <http://www.c4ensemble.org>