



Dawn of Night: Music by Stephen Chatman.

University of Toronto MacMillan Singers. Hilary Apfelstadt, conductor. Toronto: Centrediscs, CMCCD 24617, 2017. 1 compact disc (60 mins).

Reviewed by: Joannie Ing, York University

Dawn of Night consists of twenty tracks encompassing a collection of fifteen choral works by Stephen Chatman, one of Canada's most frequently performed living composers. The disc features the brilliant musicality of the University of Toronto MacMillan Singers, a mixed choral ensemble directed by Hilary

Apfelstadt. In addition, there are some wonderful solo performances on the album, particularly those of harpist Angela Schwarzkopf, oboist Clare Scholtz, and trumpeter Anita McAlister.

The works contained on this CD include poetry settings by women from several eras, including Joanna Lilley, a living author/poet based in Whitehorse, Northwest Territories; Christina Rossetti, an English Romantic poet; Sara Teasdale, an American lyric poet from the early 1900s; and Tara Wohlberg, a living composer based in British Columbia. In addition, American Romantic poet Walt Whitman and Canadian "Confederation Poet" Archibald Lampman are also represented.

Dawn of Night showcases Chatman's style as a seasoned composer. His effective combination of poetry and music is evident in the beautiful lyricism that is achieved in his compositions. His approach to composition is fairly traditional: "I look to the past for inspiration and care little about the modernist obsession with originality and 'new' procedures. I'm more interested in creating fresh 'twists and a few surprises' based on fairly traditional elements and language."¹ It is a style that the composer intends for a "general classical music audience... I write what I want to write, and I try to imagine that I'm sitting in the audience too, asking myself, 'What would I enjoy hearing?'"² In the liner notes, Chatman explains his aesthetic goals: "My invariable intention has been not only to create, as Ravel said, 'complex but not complicated' music, but also, through the marriage of



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1. Rick MacMillan, "Chatman Draws Listeners in with Twists and Surprises," *Words & Music* 6, no. 4 (Apr 1999): 14-15.

2. MacMillan, 14-15.

words and music, to illicit feeling among performers and listeners.”³ The resulting music on the album is breathtaking, beautiful, and lyrical, but arguably too safe for some. If one seeks to listen to experimental music that is “outside-the-box,” this would not be the album of choice.

Chatman’s musical compositions are deceptively simple but stunning. The aesthetic musical choices complement the poetic writing and are effectively realized in these performances. The title work, *Dawn of Night* (with poetry by Tara Wohlberg), consists of two movements, “whisper me” and “hush, hush,” both of which are scored for choir with cello and harp. The setting of “whisper me” makes use of onomatopoeia, where choristers freely intone the words: whisper me, whisper / long, longing this / height of night / the dawn, long, longing.⁴

While the liner notes include all the chosen poetry, one can simply close one’s eyes and listen with sheer enjoyment—the diction is startlingly clear and the music tenderly highlights the emotions expressed behind the lyrics. The clarity in diction is particularly evident in Chatman’s settings of Sara Teasdale’s “Let It Be Forgotten,” and “Tree of Life,” both of which are rich *a cappella* settings with long, expressive lines consisting of mainly homophonic hymn-like textures that capture the essence of the poems.

Among the other noteworthy works on the album is Chatman’s setting for choir and trumpet of Walt Whitman’s “Reconciliation,” in which a soldier reflects upon the death of his comrade in the startling horrors of war. The solo trumpet enhances the military theme in a slow, contemplative setting of the text. For his choral setting of Wohlberg’s poem, “Dreams Offer Solace,” Chatman incorporates solo oboe with choir, which provides a lyrical and melancholic line that creates a dreamy state. The album ends with a setting for choir and piano of Wohlberg’s “Our Garden of Life,” which celebrates growth with the “spirit of the new season.” As the poem describes how the “roots of our garden seep deeply,”⁵ and how each rose bud presents “a promise sweet perfume of ecstasy,”⁶ the music utilizes sweeping melodic lines and rich chordal movements in the piano part.

All in all, *Dawn of Night* is a fine collection showcasing Chatman’s skill and style as a fairly traditional choral composer. The goal of eliciting depth of feeling through the marriage of text and music is certainly achieved, and clarity of diction is never sacrificed. Most of the tracks are slow and contemplative, employing long, expressive melodic lines that are both beautiful and lyrical. The album is a fine addition to the Canadian choral landscape.

3. Stephen Chatman, liner notes for *Dawn of Night*, MacMillan Singers, Hilary Apfelstadt, Centrediscs 24617, 2017, 1 compact disc, 2.

4. Tara Wohlberg, “Whisper Me,” liner notes for *Dawn of Night*, 9.

5. Tara Wohlberg, “Our Garden of Life,” liner notes for *Dawn of Night*, 5.

6. Wohlberg, 5.