

VOX Program Notes June 2024, *In Her Image*

Your World

*Your World is as big as you make it.
I know, for I used to abide
In the narrowest nest in a corner,
My wings pressing close to my side*

*But I sighted the distant horizon
Where the skyline encircled the sea
And I throbbed with a burning desire
To travel this immensity*

*I battered the cordons around me
And cradled my wings on the breeze,
Then soared to the uttermost reaches
With rapture, with power, with ease!*

-Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966)

VOX Femina Los Angeles presents a concert that celebrates the strength, resilience, and creativity of women. From NASA scientists and mathematicians to Harlem Renaissance poets, from freedom fighters to everyday survivors – the themes of this concert express a variety of experiences with a unifying message of the hope and freedom that emerge from the support of community. As ever, this expression of community is eloquently performed through the act of communal singing and listening. In keeping with our identity as a choral ensemble that contributes to our community through the encouragement of living compositional voices, many of the works featured in this concert are recent or brand new commissions.

Carnegie Hall Festival Chorus

We commence with “One With the Wind”, a piece commissioned by VOX Femina Los Angeles in 2014, featuring text by Larissa FastHorse and David O, and music by David O. The text includes words in Lakota which define circles of community. *Misnala*, as sung by the soloist, refers to herself. She is joined by a trio singing *Tiwahe* – representing her immediate family. Then her extended family, her friends, her colleagues appear, announcing themselves with the word *Tioshpaye*, “to be part of a circle.” Finally, her circle broadens to include her people, her nation: *Oyate*. Together, these circles of community bolster the individual and support each other, rallying with the phrase “*Hoka Hey*”, which Larissa FastHorse explains is used in this piece to “urge a person forward (like into battle) with a confidence that they have lived their lives so well that every day is as good a day to live or die as any other because the person is already walking on the good Red Road (the right path).”

Marie-Claire Sandon refers to her piece “The Girl with the Numbers” as a “miniature portrait” of NASA research mathematician Katherine Johnson. In her notes on the piece, Sandon highlights Johnson’s accomplishments:

...On February 20th 1962, John Glenn was the first American to launch into space and orbit the Earth. *Friendship 7*’s success heavily depended on the exactitude of the rocket trajectory’s calculations. A few days prior to the mission, Glenn trusted his life with only one person to confirm by hand these IBM-generated numbers: Katherine Johnson, 44 year-old mathematician; daughter, sister, widow, wife, mother of three, friend, teacher, community-builder, chorister; the first woman – and African-American woman – to join NASA’s Space Flight Research Division in Langley’s Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory as research mathematician, and who was part of the Space Task Group for America’s first multiple missions to space. Human computer. “The girl with the numbers”.

Born in 1918, West Virginia, Katherine Johnson lived in a time and place where social norms were being questioned for both women and Black people. Having been denied an education higher than grade 6 himself, Johnson’s father armed her with many tools. One that would propel her beyond many challenges was the following lesson: “You are no better than anybody, but nobody’s better than you.”...

“I loved numbers and numbers loved me. They followed me everywhere. No matter what I did, I was always finding something to count [...]”. In the end, Johnson got to live her dream as a research mathematician. This choral piece is my reaction to reading her YA-oriented autobiography, *Reaching For The Moon*. May her story continue to inspire women and men, young and old alike.

“I Want to Die While You Love Me” was commissioned by the 2013 ACDA Women’s Choir Commission Consortium, including VOX Femina Los Angeles. In this piece, composer Rosephanye Powell sets the passionate words of Harlem Renaissance playwright, writer, and poet Georgia Douglas Johnson that were published as part of her 1928 volume *An Autumn Love Cycle*. The text describes a perfect day with a beloved – one that she wishes to never be spoiled by the passage of time: “I want to die while you love me and never, never see the glory of this perfect day grow dim or cease to be.” Powell starts this piece as a duet, as if between two lovers, then allows the harmony to blossom and the emotion to intensify. The wave ultimately breaks with a gentle reminder of the lyric motto to end the piece.

Jocelyn Hagen’s “Searching For Dark Matter” was commissioned by National Concerts in honor of VOX Femina’s Carnegie Hall performance. For this special work, Hagen adapted text written by Rebecca Elson (1960-1999). Elson was an astronomer and a writer, and her poems were published posthumously after her early death from cancer at age 39. Drawing upon her extensive background in physics and astronomy, her poems express the breathless wonder born from scientific exploration. In these lyrics, the life cycles of stars are made akin to human experience: the coldness of impending loss is tempered by hope in a universe that goes on in spite of death, that there may be “always a star where we can warm ourselves.” The piece

starts out contemplative, with an alto flute in dialogue with the voice, and vibraphone and glockenspiel adding a touch of celestial to the soundscape. As hope builds, the tempo gradually accelerates before it bursts into a confident tempo with a driving ostinato played by the piano, building to a climactic finish.

In “Canto Y Libertad”, Diana Saez and Suzette Ortiz adapt the Afro-Latino Bomba style from Puerto Rico into a 4-part piece for women’s chorus, piano, and percussion ensemble of wood blocks, maracas, and congas. The Bomba is music of survival and resistance that originated from communities of people enslaved during the European colonial period. This particular style is the *Yubá*, a more moderate tempo form that is rendered in a 6/8 rhythm. This *Yubá* features a recurring call and response section sung with syllables (traditionally, a way to facilitate participation for people from different West African regions who spoke different languages) which interchanges with sections of lyrics in Spanish: “Come, sing with me for freedom!”

Elaine Hagenberg’s “Measure Me, Sky!” was commissioned by the Nashville School of the Arts for the 2023 National American Choral Directors Association Conference. The text comes from a poem by poet and violinist Leonora Speyer (1872-1956) that is full of words that illustrate the embodiment of flight: “Sky, be my depth/Wind, be my width and my height.” Hagenberg paints these words with expansive melismatic triplet phrases that are extended through deft hand-offs between higher and lower voices. This energy is matched with triplet figures in the piano that drive the rhythmic charge and soar alongside.

VOX Carnegie Spotlight

Hildegard von Bingen was a 12th century German Benedictine abbess and mystic, and an influential voice in the medieval Catholic Church. In addition to running her monastery, interpreting and transcribing her visions, writing religious and medical texts, and preaching publicly (something that women were otherwise not allowed to do) Hildegard also composed liturgical music for her nuns to sing, and several of these pieces - including “O viridissima virga” - were compiled into a cycle called *Symphonia*. It is likely that her nuns were rather talented singers; in comparison to other monophonic chants of the time, Hildegard’s melodies have exceptionally wide ranges and difficult leaps. She also matched her melodic writing to the character of the text, another unusual compositional nuance for religious plainchant. This piece is a song of praise to the Virgin Mary, comparing her to the beauty of nature in motion: green branches and beautiful flowers springing forth and radiating anew, offering hope like the newness of Spring.

For “The Tree of Peace”, Gwyneth Walker adapted lyrics from the poem *O Brother Man* by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892). Walker writes:

The text for **The Tree of Peace** has been adapted from the Quaker poem, “O Brother Man,” by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892). This contemporary adaptation of the poem broadens the scope of the original with more inclusive language, opening with,

“O, my brother and my sister, all who walk upon this earth, fold to your hearts each other.”

A new text fragment, "Listen, listen to one another," is introduced into the poem, and serves as an interlude between the stanzas. The final sentence of the original poem becomes the focal point of this work, returning many times. “Love shall tread out the fire of anger, and in its ashes plant a tree of peace.”

The musical setting reflects the dual nature of the title, **tree** (strength) and **Peace** (tenderness). The work opens with accented chords in the piano accompaniment. These chords are marked “with strength.” This is the conviction of the **Tree** of Peace.

The tender aspects are introduced in the arpeggio patterns in the piano. These are marked “flowing.” And the related choral phrases refer to humanity (“O, my brother and my sister”), to mercy and to the peace of the Lord. Passages of tenderness alternate and intertwine with passages of strength to form a confluence of the message: a prayer for peace.

Also known as the Black national anthem, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” was written by James Weldon Johnson in 1900 and set to music by J. Rosamond Johnson in 1905 as a hymn song of thanksgiving and an expression of faith and freedom. Zanaida Robles’s arrangement builds in forces and strength as it goes, starting with a soloist gently singing, the choir picking up her melody in unison at first, breaking into harmony as tension builds in the piano. The tension breaks in a cry against injustice, voices reaching a point of disunity that still retains hope for unification as they echo one another. The soloist leads the group into a final statement of truth, freedom, and belonging for all to partake: “Lift ev’ry voice!”

Closing Set

We close our concert with a set of music that celebrates our community – the support we give and have been given, sacrifices made, and love that is shared.

Susan LaBarr wrote “We Remember Them” in memory of Hardus and Dalene Scheepers (1962-2017), parents of choral conductor Gerrit Scheeper of Brooklyn Choral Artists (South Africa). The text by Rabbi Sylvan Kamens and Rabbi Jack Riemer was first published in 1975 in the *Gates of Prayer: A New Union Prayerbook*. This gentle elegy pulls us steadfastly through three iterations of the refrain, repeating the assurance: “As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us, we remember them.”

“Warrior Song” by women’s folk band The Wyrld Sisters is a narrative of a woman’s coming to maturity – once too afraid to fight, then too disillusioned, she finally heeds the cries of her sisters and her own cries to at last become a warrior for womankind.

Premiering tonight, another commission by VOX Femina Los Angeles. In “When I Become an Old Woman,” Sherry Blevins celebrates the freedoms that come from reaching an age when we no longer care about what anyone thinks of us. In her notes to the performers, Blevins writes: “...most of all, **have fun** being saucy, a little naughty, and all the good things we plan to be when one day... we too are old!”

Her published poetry collections *The Heart of a Woman* (1918), which inspired the title of Maya Angelou’s 1981 autobiography, and *Bronze* (1922) both addressed issues faced by women of color. In “When I Rise Up,” composer Zachary J. Moore sets two of Johnson’s poems in one piece: “When I Rise Up,” published in *Bronze*, and a self-published poem from the end of her life, “Your World.” The span of the two works encompasses the experience of a person’s lifetime: from youthful dreams and ambitions, to looking back upon life’s struggles and accomplishments, and preparing to pass on the possibilities to the next generation.