

Who hasn't been moved by a song? There is something primal about the human voice expressing words and sentiments that we otherwise might find difficult to speak. The fame and fortune that accrue to those few who can move millions with their songs attest to music's universal appeal.

Joan Szymko's music may require more dedicated listening, but it is no less inspiring.

"For me, music is my spirituality," says the Portland composer and choral conductor. Though she has turned her back on the Catholicism of her family, she has turned toward a musical expression of spirit that breaks free of the rigid confines of liturgical music.

"I left the church not so much because I was a lesbian, but because I was a feminist," she explains over a late lunch in the Hawthorne neighborhood, where she lives.

Despite devout parents who have never come to full acceptance of her sexuality, Szymko expresses a deep and pure joy in her music.

"I started composing in my 20s, and that became my God connection.... I still felt strongly connected to the Mystery, to the Source, so I knew I was OK," she adds quietly, peering out from a shock of her dramatic silvery hair.

On her debut recording, *Openings*, the breadth of her sensitivity to the earth and its inhabitants is clearly audible.

As a composer primarily of music to be sung, Szymko is drawn to some fascinating texts for this record, including some by a 19th century Igluik shaman. *Openings* also features four poems by Mary Oliver, and one in particular seems to represent the overall essence of the music. "Sunrise" concludes with this passage: "What is the name of the deep breath I would take over and over for all of us? Call it whatever you want, it is happiness, it is another one of the ways to enter fire."

While some of the songs spotlight the spectacular voice of Seattle performer Thomasa Eckert, many others on the CD are rendered by Viriditas, the choral chamber group of about 24 women that Szymko started in Portland in 1994. These women sing in clear voices that are achingly beautiful, like sudden sunlight after a strong rain. Undoubtedly, some of the unique appeal is the quality of all female voices, though a few songs are accompanied by cello, which adds the deeper octaves.

Most of the works on *Openings* are emotionally evocative and strongly melodic, as the voices rise and swoop and arch gracefully through the air. It's music to listen to under a vault of stars, or while watching a swallow dip

Open to the music

Joan Szymko leads women in songs—her own and many others

BY ORIANA GREEN

on a breeze. It's music that begs to be connected back to its source, to be heard beyond the confines of interior spaces.

The title piece will be familiar to fans of *Do Jump*, as it was featured in the theater company's latest show, which just finished a sold-out three-week run on Broadway to great acclaim. Szymko is *Do Jump*'s resident composer and performs with the company, singing and playing several instruments.

According to Szymko, the title work is about "moving from darkness into light and expansiveness." As is the case with most of her compositions for *Do Jump*, this one was written for an aerial dance piece, and her lyrical music seems especially well-suited to the fluid movements of bodies suspended in space. That perfect union gives a deeper meaning to music that is uplifting.

One reason her music stands up so well to repeated listenings is the complexity and variety of the pieces on this CD. Much influenced by African rhythms, Szymko says she loves mixed meters, adding: "I avoid the square—language changes and shifts, so why not music?"

Indeed, her music is as varied as the ways in which it comes to her. Sometimes she just hears it in her head then works it out on a piano, and other times she begins by singing, then taping what she has sung.

"I wrote 'Openings' sitting at the marimba," she confides, then adds, "The process is about listening—where does this want to go?"

Though most people grow up singing, whether in school or church or both, many of us have long since forgotten the elation associated with matching our voices to lines of melody and harmony. If you are a woman with that yearning still alive in you, the Aurora Chorus may be an outlet. (Men, of course, have a terrific opportunity with the Portland Gay Men's Chorus.)

Founded in 1991 by David York, the Aurora Chorus is part of the Concord Community of Choirs.

After 10 years directing the Seattle Wom-



en's Ensemble, a lesbian-identified choir, Szymko retreated to Vashon Island for two years of intensive composing. After that respite, York lured her to Portland to take over Aurora, a group that over the years has ranged from 90 to 130 women participants.

"What I like about Aurora," Szymko says, "is being a lesbian is no big deal—if people have any discomfort about it, they can vote with their feet. It's a nonissue."

One of the reasons the group is so large is that, unlike Viriditas, no audition is required to join. Nor do women need to know how to read music or have any special training—all that will come out of the experience of being in the choir.

"We really put effort into shepherding new women as they come in," assures Szymko.

"I love being in a community of women that's a nurturing, empowering atmosphere where there's room for every kind of woman," Szymko says passionately.

"I like being in a place where I don't have to wear my sexuality on my sleeve, yet it's a place where lesbians are totally lesbians," she adds.

The women in the chorus stretch in age from 15 to 72 and enjoy celebrating one another's birthdays each month. "It's a place where women really get to rejoice in how old they're getting," says their director.

"The focus of Aurora is women's point of view, social justice issues and empowering women. We tend not to sing religious music, because it's a diversity issue," Szymko says.

After an extra-busy year with three major concerts and a recording project, the Aurora Chorus is preparing for *The Bramble and the Rose*, a performance June 18 at the First United Methodist Church in Portland. Though the group's concerts often have a serious message, Szymko feels the time is right for a lighter theme.

"The message of *The Bramble and the Rose* is that love is sweet, but you can also get screwed," she explains with a chuckle.

One highlight is sure to be "The Brook Within," composed by longtime chorus member Joan Andrews. It is an Emily Dickinson poem set to music by a woman who didn't even start composing until she was in her 60s, which speaks volumes about the empowering experience of belonging to such a group.

Other selections include "Shooting Star" by Cris Williamson, "It's Bad for Me" by Cole Porter and "Wild Women Get the Blues" by Ida Cox.

The singers, who perform the entire concert from memory, have been trained to "sing from the seat of their pants," says Szymko, adding that most people only speak and sing from the throat up.

In honor of gay pride week, the concert will also feature a solo performance of Holly Near's "Simply Love" sung by the director herself.

A line from the show's closing song may sum up this exploration of love: "Somebody come up and carry me into a seven-day kiss."

The last line of the first song on Szymko's CD is: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Joan Szymko has answered that question with a body of work that shouts to the world of creation and wonder and celebration. In this season of examining the meaning of pride, we can all be proud that she is a member of our community.

■ *The Aurora Chorus performs THE BRAMBLE AND THE ROSE at 4 and 7 p.m. June 18 at the First United Methodist Church, 1838 S.W. Jefferson St. Tickets are \$12 from In Other Words, from chorus members or by phone at (503) 721-0262.*

Women interested in joining Aurora Chorus should call (503) 721-0262 now to get on the list for the new season, which begins in September. Auditions for Viriditas will be held in September.

OPENINGS is available at Classical Millennium or from Amazon.com.

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