

MUSIC

Tall, taller, tallest

Third Angle celebrates Four Tall Women

BY KATHY BELGE

"Sometimes there is a stereotype of classical music ensembles that if you can understand music when you hear it, it must not be great art. We don't take that view," says Ron Blessinger, artistic director of Third Angle New Music Ensemble.

New Music can certainly have the reputation of being highbrow; Third Angle is out to change all that.

"We do play all the abstract expressionist music from the '50s and '60s," Blessinger continues, "but we also play music that is simply beautiful music."

Its March 28 concert in Reed College's Kaul Auditorium features the music of four female composers: the late Ruth Crawford Seeger, New York's Joan Tower, Philadelphia's Jennifer Higdon and Libby Larsen of Minneapolis.

Four Tall Women was named with the Edward Albee play *Three Tall Women* in mind. "Tallness is a commentary not on height but on power, confidence, individuality," explains Blessinger. "That is certainly the case with these four composers. They are very strong-minded, strong voices in music."

Four Tall Women is a survey of the history of American women in composition. Seeger, step-mother of folk singer Pete Seeger, composed in the 1930s. Tower,

Higdon and Larsen—three of the most respected and prolific

Lesbian composer Jennifer Higdon is a tall, tall woman

women composers in the country—represent more modern times.

Grammy winner Larsen will lead a pre-concert talk on women in music with Portland lesbian conductor Joan Szymko, who is also director of the Aurora Chorus. Szymko will conduct Larsen's "Neon Angel," based on the true story of an airline stewardess who fell out of a plane to her death in 1962. The concert will also feature the U.S. premiere of Larsen's "Licorice Stick."

"One of the things we do best," says Blessinger, "is we create intimate events like this where people have very close contact with the artists and, in this case, with a really significant composer and learn something about music that they didn't know before."

Four Tall Women also includes "Celestial Hymns" by lesbian composer Higdon. "I had written an orchestra piece called 'Blue Cathedral,'" she shares. In that work she "had the image of a glass cathedral in the sky. I also imagined the stained glass windows singing. Then I decided to write 'Celestial Hymns.' I imagined that's the music that the windows would be singing."

Higdon comes from a family of visual artists, and that carries over to her composition style. "There's a really strong image in my head of something to look at when I'm writing. It inspires the music. There's almost always a graphic picture in my head," she relates.

Higdon just returned from a trip to Washington, D.C., where the National Symphony Orchestra performed her commissioned piece "Machine." She's received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, Pew Fellowship in the Arts and International League of Women Composers as well as grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and others.

She's had commissions from the Baltimore Symphony, Brooklyn Philharmonic, Atlanta Symphony and Oregon Symphony. As a matter of fact, her 1995 Oregon Symphony commission "Shine" broke open many doors for her.

"That really kicked off a lot of stuff for me," Higdon relates. "Some of the

major commissions I got came after that piece."

That may have also started the Philadelphia's love affair with Portland. Her father and brother live in Beaverton, and she visits several times a year, claiming to love the fresh air, Coffee People shakes and Powell's Books.

Higdon is disappointed she has to be in San Francisco during *Four Tall Women*, and she encourages people to come early to hear Larsen speak. "She is one of the best that I have seen, period."

Higdon, who appears on the 1998 CD *American Lesbian Composers*, has had little trouble being out in the classical music world. "I don't think it's too much of an issue. No one's ever said anything about it." She and her partner have been together 22 years (which is something considering Higdon is only 40).

Coming from a family of artists, she says even her rural Tennessee relatives took her lesbianism well. Still, she's a bit different: "I probably am the black sheep of the family. They're listening to rock 'n' roll, and I'm going to do classical music."

Third Angle executive director Howie Bierbaum encourages people to check out *Four Tall Women*. "By and large,

people leave really energized," he says. "They're really happy when they leave, as opposed to confused and perplexed and thinking they have to like it but not sure they did." □

THIRD ANGLE NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE performs *Four Tall Women* at 8 p.m. March 28 in Reed College's Kaul Auditorium, 3203 S.E. Woodstock Blvd. Preconcert discussion begins at 7:15 p.m. Tickets are \$15-\$20 from 503-224-8499.

KATHY BELGE is a free-lance writer expanding her taste in music.



Third Angle New Music Ensemble delights in the music of *Four Tall Women* March 28 in Reed College's Kaul Auditorium

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