

REVIEW: *THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWNING AND SONGS OF THE SOUL*

Austin's Conspirare choir records UO Professor Robert Kyr's major works

It's rare to see the kind of visceral response to contemporary music I witnessed at the premiere of University of Oregon music professor Robert Kyr's *Songs of the Soul* in the Conspirare choir's hometown of Austin, Texas, in 2011. It's one of two major vocal works on Conspirare's new CD of Kyr's music, both of which radiate a lush beauty and sincere spirituality that underlie the audience appeal I experienced in Austin.

For the first piece, *The Cloud of Unknowning*, the Eugene composer adapted the texts (and adopted the title) from a Middle English spiritual guide to contemplative prayer written in the 14th century, along with Latin psalms and the poetry of the 16th-century Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila. The title phrase refers to "a hindrance to experiencing divine love," which suggests that ignorance may not be bliss after all.

Kyr's liner notes call the music "my deepest personal response to the horrific violence of our age, which has only continued to intensify with the massacre of innocents (and innocence) in Newtown, Connecticut, followed by the incomprehensible horror in Boston."

As I wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* when I wrote about Kyr's work in 2011, it "vividly traces a journey from despair to transcendence."

At brief moments during the first movement and a couple of others, Kyr's cantata conjures an early Renaissance atmosphere, with almost chant-like choral reminiscent of some of Cappella Romana's work (Kyr has often worked with that Portland ensemble). Singers Estelí Gomez and David Farwig alternate between English and Castilian Spanish.

Conspirare's exquisite performance, featuring moments of extremely soft dynamics (as in the beginning of the section "Songs of Dawn"), undergirds a memorably melodic duet between Gomez and Farwig, especially the heart-rending "Beseeching." The tone turns harsher in "Piercing" (the section most obviously colored by Kyr's early music influences) in which the "sharp arrow" of love strikes the cloud and pierces the darkness. The final section, "Enduring," rushes to a soaring climax.

After that ascendant ending, the complementary, seven-part *Songs of the Soul* gets off to a measured start with the dark "Descending: From The Abyss," a plea for salvation from abyssal "deep waters" whose Renaissance sound reflects Kyr's work with early music vocal ensembles.

Finally, in "Hoping: Toward Dawn," it erupts into lush ecstasy. "Transforming: Beloved into Lover," based on texts from St. John of the Cross, gives Farwig and the ravishingly clear-voiced Gomez (whose award-winning early music experience shows here in her pure, vibrato-less approach that reigned before the age of opera divas) another beguiling duet. She and the chorus embark on a shimmering, rapturous ride in "Arising: A Time For Song." They return to basking in beauty in the sensuous "Uniting: Leaving My Cares" before climbing that mountain one last time in the climactic "Transcending: And Love Remains," on the familiar verse from Corinthians.

Gomez, who performs Jan. 19 at Beall Concert Hall, is sensational throughout. And Kyr's sensitive interweaving of spare string lines (courtesy of the Victoria Bach Festival Orchestra, directed by Conspirare leader Craig Hella Johnson) gives her ample opportunity to showcase her unreservedly expressive style. Without being self-consciously retro, Kyr's lush tonal harmonies and skillful counterpoint (firmly in Bach's lineage) demonstrate how contemporary composers can draw on classical music's great legacy to make modern sounds that thrill 21st-century listeners. ■



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